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A New Classroom

NIPUN Bharat has transformed teaching and learning at the foundational level

ASHISH DHAWAN AND SHAVETA SHARMA-KUKREJA

THE RESULTS OF the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) offer a glimmer of hope. For the first time in years, foundational learning outcomes — especially in Grade III — show positive trends across Indian states. This progress is no accident. It reflects a focused effort by the Indian government to prioritise quality education.

During the recent Republic Day celebrations, education was front and centre. In the parade of tableaux, we saw symbolic reminders of India's commitment to nation-building through education. The National Education Policy (NEP) set the stage for these achievements by emphasising the importance of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). But the real hero behind this success story is the NIPUN Bharat Mission.

NIPUN Bharat, or the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy, was launched in 2021 and has quietly transformed classrooms by targeting literacy and numeracy in the early grades. Consider this: The programme allocates Rs 500 per child for teaching-learning materials (TLM), empowering schools to craft vibrant, engaging lessons tailored to young learners. For teachers, who are the backbone of this mission, the states receive up to Rs 5,000 for capacity-building workshops, along with Rs 150 for resource materials to support the classroom strategies of teachers.

States are empowered with Rs 10-20 lakh each to conduct comprehensive assessments, track the progress of learning outcomes of stu-

dents and identify gaps in teaching and learning practices. To ensure seamless implementation and oversight, Rs 25 lakh to Rs 1 crore is provided for establishing robust Project Management Units at the state and district levels. This meticulous framework fuels the transformation of foundational learning.

Numbers alone cannot capture the full story. To truly understand the impact of the NIPUN Bharat Mission, we must look beyond statistics and see the children whose lives are being changed every day.

In Uttar Pradesh, Ravi Sharma, a primary school teacher, uses songs to teach mathematics. His students chant, "ek-do thaila lo, teen-chaar chalo bazaar", learning numbers as they sway to the rhythm. Odisha's Dhenkanal district tells a similar tale. Shragatika Ghosh, a second-grader, proudly reads Odia stories aloud, her confidence growing with each page.

The data backs up these anecdotes. In UP, ASER 2024 shows a leap in Grade III students' ability to read Grade II-level texts — from 24 per cent to 34 per cent — and solve subtraction problems, which improved from 29 per cent to 41 per cent between 2022 and 2024. Odisha's innovative use of colourful and contextualised workbooks has led to similar gains. Nationally, millions more children can now read and solve basic math problems.

Despite progress, foundational learning in India is still fragile. Many children struggle with more advanced concepts as they transition out of the early grades. Some, particularly from marginalised communities, begin school with-

An enhanced NIPUN 2.0 should be extended to at least 2030. This will allow interventions to take root and achieve deeper impact. It should expand focus to Grades III–V — bridging the gap between early foundational skills and higher-order learning is essential. NIPUN 2.0 should also focus on Early Childhood Education (ECE): Investments in preschool education can set children up for success before they even enter primary school.

out the readiness or skills needed to thrive.

Systemic change takes time. As the Prime Minister remarked at the Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Samagam, "It took four years for NIPUN Bharat to bear fruit." To sustain these gains — and expand them — the mission's timeline must be extended. An enhanced NIPUN 2.0 should be extended to at least 2030. This will allow interventions to take root and achieve deeper impact. It should expand its focus to Grades III–V — bridging the gap between early foundational skills and higher-order learning is essential. NIPUN 2.0 should also focus on Early Childhood Education (ECE): Investments in preschool education can set children up for success before they even enter primary school.

The ASER results prove that progress is possible. With the right tools, resources and policies, India can ensure that every child, regardless of geography or circumstance, has access to quality education. Extending NIPUN Bharat's timeline is not just about numbers or rankings. It is about stories like Shragatika's and Ravi's — stories of children who discovered their potential and teachers who found new ways to inspire. The opportunity is here. India has the chance to set a global benchmark in foundational learning. But the window for action is narrow. The time to commit to NIPUN 2.0 is now.

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Reservations in HE

Higher Education – in contrast to elementary/higher secondary education – is not meant to be a major vehicle for achieving the goal of social justice, since social injustice is an outcome of a complex interplay of many societal forces such as grafting a small group of low intellectual calibre has often been a major cause of tremendous tension and stress among the students of weak merit.

There was a time – not very long ago – when the term higher education (HE) meant chiefly teaching educational programmes at higher (post-secondary) levels in diverse disciplines and also extra research conducted in higher educational institutions such as colleges and universities funded, in large part, by the state for promotion and cultivation of such precious public goods as scientific (original) inventions, new knowledge, new theoretical/analytical discovery and insights into major dimensions of human history, society, arts and culture.

Unlike primary or secondary schools which impart universal basic education, the HE arena was historically supposed to be thronged by those who happen to have not only proven intellectual superiority but also with an innate thirst for deeper knowledge/truth and its persistent scholarly pursuits. This is how the HE system has been, for long, perhaps until the 1970s – a distinguished, sustainable and steady source of overall societal progression and flourish, scientifically, technologically, socially, politically and culturally.

However, there has been an unpalatably skewed representation/participation in HE in favour of elite and socio-economically well-off sections of population – a fact which has reflected, for long, a social injustice rooted in the economic and political systems as a breeding ground of perennial inequality in the distribution of income and wealth.

Lately – especially over post-WWII decades – many concerted criticisms and analyses of this historical inequity in the traditional HE have been raised chiefly from political standpoints and mainly by socio-political activists. However, these campaigns for greater equality in HE in terms of participation of all classes and castes seem often to remain oblivious to the historic fact that it is only the intellectually able and innately academic-minded candidates, not other members even of the elite and wealthy families, who used to get admission to institutions of higher learning and research.

Although this reflects squarely a top priority that used to be traditionally accorded to the maintenance of academic/intellectual excellence and standard of HE, this should by no means be construed as an alibi for stark social inequity manifest in a disproportionately meagre participation of candidates from socio-economically weaker sections of whom many naturally are born with no less intellectual potentialities and innately academic inclinations than their counterparts from well-to-do households. Most of the former group remain deprived of HE because their households cannot afford to spare even a single adult family member – however academically brilliant and motivated – for higher learning in college/university for even a single year without working and contributing to the survival of the entire family itself. Therefore, there has historically been a provision of scholarships and benevolent support from state or private sources for HE of such potentially outstanding candidates of the underprivileged section.

Dr B R Ambedkar, one of the finest intellectual stalwarts of India of the preceding century with superior education and expertise abroad being one of its glaring illustrations. However, this cannot hide the bare historic fact that many intellectually gifted and innately academic-minded youth from socio-economically weaker households remain deprived of HE opportunities both because of extreme paucity of scholarships as well as inordinately high opportunity cost of HE for households steeped in abject poverty.

Historically, HE, thus, has remained resistive on the premise of the basic (natural) axiom of inequality in individual intellectual endowment. That is, human beings of high intellectual calibre, ability and academic inclination are born naturally to be fewer in number and are also distributed randomly across an entire cohort of a population, irrespective of class, caste and creed.

This perfectly echoes what the illustrious modern Bengali poet of the last century, Jibanananda Das, writes in his proverbial statement: 'All are not poets, but a few are poets'. Accordingly, it would not be unreasonable to presume that there must have been many Nobel-prize winners over the preceding century who came from very underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds.

This is, of course, not to deny that at any given point of time a society would have had many more intellectual stalwarts originating in weaker socio-economic background if provisions of scholarships or financial assistance for this group would have been larger both in terms of amount and number.

Thus, a common bid across the globe (except a few countries like India) to address the necessity of taking intellectually gifted candidates from underprivileged families on board as HE institutions has never been a policy of reserving a fixed proportion of seats in colleges or universities for students from deprived classes or castes, not to mention additional relaxations in stipulated intellectual and volitional abilities at the time of admission. This reflects a longstanding pragmatic conviction particularly in these societies that academic standard and excellence in HE, unlike in universal school education, is too precious to be compromised under any circumstances – let alone in the name or cause of social equity or justice.

However, of late – especially after WWII – in the wake of neoliberal projects of massification, marketization and privatization of HE, the western world has embraced affirmative action to widen participation (read market demand) in HE of youth from underprivileged sections sometimes almost indiscriminately (i.e. irrespective of levels of intellectual ability and academic volition stipulated officially for admission) via arguably a backdoor of invoking a notion of 'plurality' of students per se (in terms of racial, cultural, ethnicity traits), which, it is argued, exerts an independence influence towards achieving greater efficacy of HE.

Apart from the fact that this plurality-argument for relaxation, if necessary, in academic standards and eligibility in the admission process has been frowned upon in apex court judgements in most western nations, recent research appears distinctly uncertain, dodgy and unclear over the extent of realisability of purported effects of increased diversity per se via affirmative action on the academic performance of students from disadvantaged groups or the achievement of the goal of social integration and equity in HE campuses. (For evidence on this see my recent monograph Higher Education and Intellectual Homogenization: The Neoliberal Reign, New York London: Routledge, 2023).

Indeed, there exists a lingering concern about affirmative action's potentially plausible effects towards lowering overall academic standards of HE. For example, a special adviser to the Education Secretary in UK wrote in 2003: "Although they would not put it like this, most prominent people in the education world tacitly accept that failing to develop the talents of the most able is a price worth paying to be able to pose as defenders of 'equality".

In this broad global scenario of affirmative action in HE, Indian thinking is pretty unique for its sustained advocacy of a policy of reservation, which is often coupled with relaxations, if necessary, in eligibility for admission of students from conventionally disadvantaged sections and castes – especially when reserved seats are not filled up by adhering to a common set of stipulated academic criteria for admission to HE institutions. All this, while being heavily instrumental to massive expansion of enrolment from underrepresented social categories, together with increased diversity of teaching courses, very often end up being pointers of no return, if not negative at societal level.

The clue to such outcomes is not very far to seek. The admission of pupils from socio-economically weaker sections to HE institutions via both reservation and relaxation of eligibility criteria for admission often has a great potential of diluting the overall academic standard of education which in turn frustrates the core philosophy behind HE. This is mainly because of the evidently limited success or perhaps even a failure of the commonly perceived 'catching-up' effects on intellectually weak students admitted via reservation. Therefore, this uniquely Indian policy of 'reservation' or quota in admission to HE institutions, when coupled with academic relaxation for admission of academically weaker students from reserved categories, effectually grafts a group with lower academic merit on to a numerous majority (which comprises of students from all socio-economic categories, and often proves to be misplaced.

This is because of two interrelated reasons. HE – in contrast to elementary/higher secondary education – is not meant to be a major vehicle for achieving the goal of social justice, since social injustice is an outcome of a complex interplay of many societal forces such as political economy, history, culture, politics and religion. Secondly, any attempt at grafting a small group of low intellectual calibre has often been a major cause of tremendous tension and stress among the students of weak merit, closing in depression and related mental torments culminating sometimes into incidences of suicides in campuses.

The universal right to school education or a universal adult franchise in elections in a democracy is a notion which is eminently inapplicable in case of HE for the simple reason that HE calls for superior intellectual abilities and passionate academic motivations – some distinct inherently cognitive resources, which cannot be manufactured or injected.

Let this clear and natural dictum be followed perennially by the thinking and praxis in the sphere of HE not be allowed to be muddled by letting political interests interfere in the socially sacrosanct domain of higher learning and research. Its corollary, of course, is a manifold expansion and liberality in the provision of scholarships and other financial support to the meticulously identified cohort of genuinely meritorious candidates with an innate academic affinity coming from socio-economically underprivileged and deprived sections of the society and polity.

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Med seats: SC to upset balance

India has all the diversities a country can imagine and the founders of this nation were eminently mindful of this reality. Instead of ignoring or forcibly filling those possible fault lines, they created ways and means within the democratic framework for an organic process to develop and forge a fraternity that shall help Indians negotiate the differences and work for greater common good.

The Supreme Court's decision that domicile reservation in post graduate medical seats in states is violative of Article 14 of the Constitution is an attempt to artificially address the question of inequality that exists in India. Article 14 mandates that the state shall not deny any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.

The SC's decision that domicile quota in PG medical seats in states is violative of Article 14 of the Constitution is an attempt to artificially address the question of inequality that exists in India.

At present, 50 per cent of the seats in post-graduate medical courses are reserved for the candidates from the state where the medical course is conducted and the other 50 per cent is filled by candidates selected based on an all-India merit list. The court would interpret the Article to conclude that reservation in higher levels on the basis of residence would be violative of it and order that all the seats should be filled only on the basis of merit as established by the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) on an all-India basis and there shall be no state quota.

Education is a subject that originally found its place in the state list of the Constitution on the argument that each state should have the right and authority to decide its priorities based on its demands. Some states have forged ahead in healthcare thanks to the vision on which they have acted for the future and the investment they have made to ensure that they have trained manpower to take care of their people. The balancing has to be done to determine which takes precedence, a state's right to health or an individual's right to higher education. It's a complex issue and needs wider application of mind. The court's order has the potential to upset the balance that exists among Indian states, and hence it must review its decision.

Budget 2025 overlooks joblessness

The previous Budget, presented in July 2024 after the Lok Sabha election, had accorded priority to employment and skill development, given the nature of the election mandate. The Finance Minister had announced a Prime Minister's Package of five schemes and initiatives to facilitate job and internship opportunities for 4.1 crore youth over a five-year period with a central outlay of ₹2 lakh crore. However, the Budget speech delivered in Parliament on February 1, 2025, did not refer to the Prime Minister's Package even once. The document on implementation of Budget 2024-25 announcements states that a "draft Cabinet note on Employment Linked Incentive scheme is under finalisation" and "several meetings have been held with the Ministry of Labour and CII to discuss the relationship between capital expenditure and employment generation". In other words, the future of the scheme looks bleak.

Deflationary budget

The September 2024 report of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) revealed that in 2023-24, the youth unemployment rate (for those aged 15-29 years) had increased to 10.2% and the unemployment rate among graduates was 13%. Time series data from the PLFS show that the share of the workforce engaged in regular or salaried employment in the post-pandemic period has shrunk, while the share engaged in agriculture and informal self-employment has risen.

The latest Economic Survey also shows that average real earnings of self-employed male workers in India fell from ₹9,454 in 2017-18 to ₹8,591 in 2023-24. The monthly real wages of regular/salaried male workers also fell from an average of ₹12,665 in 2017-18 to ₹11,858 in 2023-24. Surplus labour inundating the job market, combined with high food inflation, have severely squeezed the real incomes and livelihoods of

Prasenjit Bose

Economist and activist

Tax breaks for income tax payers along with cuts in capital and welfare expenditure are unlikely to raise the living standards of the vast majority of working people

an overwhelming majority of India's workforce. For a Finance Minister to overlook this is disingenuous.

The advanced estimates of GDP have already projected a decline of the real GDP growth rate to 6.4% in 2024-25 from 8.2% last year. In keeping with this, there is a slowdown in the Centre's net tax revenues in 2024-25. With the Finance Minister keen on adhering to the fiscal consolidation path, the axe has fallen on government expenditure. Total expenditure is now likely to be over ₹1 lakh crore short of Budget Estimates (BE), with capital expenditure falling short of the target by over ₹92,000 crore.

Public expenditure on rural and urban development, agriculture, education, food subsidy, energy, transport, and health are all being axed. Among centrally sponsored schemes, the Revised Estimates (RE) for the Jal Jeevan Mission and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (both rural and urban) show declines of ₹47,469 crore and ₹38,575 crore, respectively, from their BE. The expenditure on MGNREGA was cut in the BE itself by ₹3,654 crore from the previous year. Such deep cuts in budgeted capital and welfare expenditures would have a dampening effect on investment and consumption, especially in rural areas.

The Finance Minister has sought to counterbalance the deflationary impact of these expenditure cuts by enhancing the annual rebate for income tax payers from ₹7 lakh to ₹12 lakh from 2025-26. Data from the Income Tax Department show that only around 2.8 crore individuals had paid positive taxes in the assessment year 2023-24, out of the 7.54 crore filing income tax returns. The income tax relief for next year would therefore go to 2.8 crore individuals, who form only around 22% of India's salaried workforce. For the rest who are faced with dwindling real incomes, there is nothing on offer.

The Finance Minister has estimated the revenue foregone on

account of the income tax rebate to be ₹1 lakh crore. Instead, a cut of a similar magnitude in indirect taxes, such as the exorbitant excise duties on fuel or the central GST rates on mass consumption goods, could have provided relief to the entire class of working people. It is well known that the consumption propensity of wage earners is higher than that of the profit earners.

The average daily wage rate actually received by a MGNREGA worker (as per data provided by Ministry of Rural Development dashboard) has increased from ₹200.71 in 2019-20 to ₹252.31 in 2024-25. The national floor level minimum wage for unskilled workers in agriculture, in contrast, has been set at ₹452 in 2024-25. A well deserved, substantial hike in the MGNREGA wages in the Union Budget alongside an increase in rural development outlays would have led to increased consumption demand in the rural areas. The consumption effect of income tax breaks, in contrast, would be far more limited and concentrated in urban areas.

Running out of ideas

The latest Economic Survey cites a private sector research report to show how the after tax profit-to-GDP ratio of Nifty 500 companies surged from 2.1% in 2020-21 to 4.8% in 2023-24. While the deep corporate tax cut of September 2019 played a vital role in this profit surge, it has neither translated into higher levels of private corporate investment, nor employment generation.

Yet, the 2025 Union Budget has relied upon another tax break, this time for income tax payers, to inject demand into the economy, even while cutting capital and welfare expenditures to compress the fiscal deficit. This is unlikely to generate higher levels of economic growth and employment and raise the living standards of the vast majority of the working people. It is evident that the government has run out of ideas on the economic front. 4/3/7

John J. Kennedy

Education, often regarded as the foundation of societal progress, thrives not only on structured curricula but also on other types of guidance and support provided to learners and educators alike. Two indispensable components of this are mentorship and coaching. While these terms frequently echo in academic discourses and institutional meetings, their implementation often falls short. Against this backdrop, it may be worthwhile to understand the relevance, challenges, and potential of mentorship and coaching in India's education system, supplemented by global perspectives and evidence-based insights.

Beyond the buzzword

How mentorship and coaching can help transform the Indian higher education system

Distinct roles

Mentorship and coaching, though often used interchangeably, have distinct definitions and roles in education. Mentorship involves a long-term relationship where an experienced individual provides guidance and support to mentees, fostering their personal and professional growth.

Conversely, coaching is more goal-oriented and performance-driven, focusing on enhancing specific skills through structured sessions.

Both are vital for a comprehensive educational experience, benefiting students and teachers. According to a study published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, mentorship contributes significantly to students' academic success, emotional well-being, and career readiness.

Another study published in the *Harvard Educational Review* (2020) has found that coaching has improved teachers' teaching efficacy and job satisfaction.

In India, however, incorporating mentorship and coaching in educational institutions remains sporadic. Many institutions lack the awareness or resources to implement these frameworks effectively.

Globally, institutions in the U.S., the U.K., and other nations have demonstrated the transformative potential of mentorship and coaching. For instance, Stanford University's "First-Generation Mentorship Programme" has reported a 25% increase in student retention rates among its participants. Similarly, the University of Oxford's peer-mentoring initiative for educators has led to a 30% improvement in teaching effectiveness, as per their 2021 annual report. In the corporate-academic partnership realm, initiatives such as IBM's "SkillsBuild" in collaboration with universities have shown remarkable success.

Benefits

When properly implemented, mentorship and coaching create a ripple effect of benefits. Personalised guidance enhances learning outcomes and helps students identify their strengths and address weaknesses, leading to improved academic performance. A supportive mentor can help students build emotional resilience and navigate challenges like stress and anxiety, which are prevalent in the highly competitive educational environments today. For teachers, coaching provides actionable feedback and professional development, ultimately enhancing classroom engagement and student outcomes, thus empowering them. Mentorship bridges the gap between academia and industry, ensuring students are better prepared for real-world challenges and career-ready.

Several steps are imperative to foster a culture of mentorship and coaching in India. First, intervention at the policy level is crucial. Educational policies must mandate mentorship programmes and allocate dedicated funding. Second, regular workshops and certifications can equip educators with the skills needed for effective mentorship. Third, awareness campaigns highlighting success stories and global best practices can inspire institutions to adopt these frameworks. Finally, using technology and digital platforms can democratise mentorship by providing students and teachers access to experts from around the globe.

Integrating mentorship and coaching into the Indian higher education system holds transformative potential.

These interventions can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, foster emotional intelligence, and create a workforce that is not only competent but also adaptable. Moreover, such programmes can position India as a global leader in educational innovation.

Mentorship and coaching, therefore, are not mere buzzwords but essential elements of a meaningful education. By learning from global successes and addressing local challenges, Indian educational institutions can pave the way for an inclusive and impactful educational ecosystem.

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Budget's Viksit Bharat push in jobs, energy & R&D focus

There were heightened expectations from Union Budget 2025-26 regarding building on the momentum of last year's nine budget priorities — and it has delivered. With India marching towards realising the Viksit Bharat vision, this budget takes decisive steps for high-impact growth. The Economic Survey's estimate of 6.4% real GDP growth and retail inflation softening from 5.4% in FY24 to 4.9% in FY25 reinforces India's position as the world's fastest-growing major economy. The budget for the coming fiscal has capitalised on prudent fiscal management and strengthens the four key pillars of India's economic resilience — jobs, energy security, manufacturing, and innovation.

India needs to create 7.85 million non-agricultural jobs annually until 2030 — and this budget steps up. It has enhanced workforce capabilities through the launch of five National Centres of Excellence for Skilling and aims to align training with "Make for India, Make for the World" manufacturing needs. Additionally, an expansion of capacity in the IITs will accommodate 6,500 more students, ensuring a steady pipeline of technical talent. It also recognises the role of micro and small enterprises (MSMEs) in generating employment. The enhancement of credit guarantees for micro and small enterprises from ₹5 crore to ₹10 crore, unlocks an additional ₹1.5 lakh crore in loans over five years. This, coupled with customised credit cards for micro enterprises with a ₹5 lakh limit, will improve capital access for small businesses. While these measures are commendable, the scaling of industry-academia collaboration as well as fast-tracking vocational training will be key to ensuring sustained job creation.

India remains highly dependent on Chinese imports for solar modules, electric vehicle (EV) batteries, and key electronic components, exposing the sector to geopolitical risks and trade barriers. This budget takes this challenge head-on. It allocates ₹81,174 crore to the energy sector, a significant increase from the ₹63,403 crore in the current fiscal, signalling a major push toward strengthening supply chains and reducing import dependence. The exemptions for 35 additional capital goods required for EV battery manufacturing adds to this. The reduction of import duty on solar cells from 25% to 20% and solar modules from 40% to 20% eases costs for developers while India scales up domestic production capacity. The allocation to the ministry of new and renewable energy (MNRE) has increased 53% to ₹26,549 crore, with the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana seeing an 80% jump to ₹20,000 crore . These measures provide the decisive push, but to truly achieve our climate goals, we must also accelerate investments in battery recycling, critical mineral extraction, and strategic supply chain integration.

With capital expenditure estimated at 4.3% of GDP, the highest it has been for the past 10 years, this budget lays the foundation for India's manufacturing resurgence. Initiatives such as the National Manufacturing Mission will provide enabling policy support for small, medium, and large industries and will further solidify the Make-in-India vision by strengthening domestic value chains. Infrastructure remains a bottleneck for manufacturers. The budget addresses this with massive investments in logistics to reduce supply chain costs, which currently stand at 13-14% of GDP, significantly higher than that of most of the developed nations (~8%). A cornerstone of the Mission is clean tech manufacturing. There are promising measures throughout the value chain. The budget introduces customs duty exemptions on lithium-ion battery scrap, cobalt, and 12 other critical minerals, securing the supply of essential materials and strengthening India's position in global clean-tech value chains.

Despite India's thriving tech ecosystem, research and development (R&D) investments remain below 1% of GDP, compared to 2.4% in China and 3.5% in the US. Future jobs will require Industry 4.0 capabilities, and India must prepare now. This budget tackles the gap. A good start is the government allocating ₹20,000 crore to a private-sector-driven Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) initiative. The budget recognises the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) by introducing the PM Research Fellowship, which will provide 10,000 fellowships for technological research in IITs and IISc with enhanced financial support . This, along with a Centre of Excellence for AI and 50,000 Atal Tinkering Labs in government schools, are optimistic steps toward a knowledge-driven economy.

Sumant Sinha

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ASER: A lot of celebrate, but much yet to be done

Patralekha Chatterjee

Dev 360

The key findings reveal that enrolment in both government and private schools has gone back to pre-pandemic levels.

It is no secret that foundational skills — literacy, numeracy and increasingly, knowledge of digital tools — are the building blocks of success in the 21st century. Without universalising these core skills, no country and no society can achieve sustainable success. This has become even more relevant with the emergence of new technologies and in a post-DeepSeek world, where the entry barrier to the world of artificial intelligence (AI) has just been shattered by a Chinese startup.

Distressingly, millions of children in the developing world still cannot read simple texts or know how to do basic maths by the end of primary school. The Covid-19 pandemic deepened the crisis in learning in India and elsewhere. Since then, heart-warmingly, there has been a recovery in learning outcomes. This merits celebration, even if it is not a quantum leap.

It is equally important to acknowledge that India remains a patchwork quilt in every metric, including learning. In an increasingly uncertain, unpredictable, and ruthlessly competitive world, Indian states compete. There is also the wider world, and competition with other countries. It is vital to benchmark oneself against those who are doing better rather than those who are doing worse. We cannot afford to lose sight of this even as we celebrate.

First, the good news encapsulated in the recently-released Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024, a nationwide rural household survey conducted by Pratham, a leading NGO. The report provides a snapshot of learning in rural India, where the majority still lives. The survey covered 649,491 children across 17,997 villages in 605 rural districts and was carried out in collaboration with local organisations and institutions in each district.

The key findings reveal that enrolment in both government and private schools has gone back to pre-pandemic levels and there have been overall improvements in reading and arithmetic skills. In 2024, for the first time, ASER also included a set of digital tasks to assess the ability of children aged 14-16 to do simple tasks on their smartphones.

The ASER survey found that at the all-India level, 83 per cent of schools said they received directives from the government to implement FLN (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy) activities. Around 78 per cent said that at least one teacher in the school had been trained in FLN, while 75 per cent also received relevant learning material.

Among three-year-olds, enrolment in pre-primary institutions has gone up from 68.1% in 2018 to 75.8% in 2022 to 77.4% in 2024. Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Telangana have achieved near-universal enrolment for this age group. Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh have the highest proportion of three-year-olds not enrolled anywhere (over 50%).

"The percentage of Class 3 children able to at least read Class 2 level text was 20.9% in 2018. This figure fell to 16.3% in 2022, and has increased to 23.4% in 2024. The improvement in government schools is higher than the corresponding recovery for private schools. Following a decline in Class 3 reading levels in government schools in most states in 2022, all states have shown a recovery in 2024," says the report.

There is improvement also at the elementary school, among children in the 6-14 age-group. All-India figures show an uptick in reading levels for children in government schools in all elementary grades (Class 1-8) since 2022. Across the country, children's basic arithmetic levels also reveal tangible improvement in both government and private schools, reaching the highest level in over a decade. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, 55.3% of children in Class 8 can now do division. In 2014, the corresponding figure was 43.9%. At the all-India level, the proportion of children in Class 5 who can at least do a numerical division problem has also improved.

The report credits the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Nipun Bharat Mission, a national initiative to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy skills, for contributing to the learning improvements.

Clearly, investments in human development and a push towards foundational learning pay off.

But while all-India figures paint an uplifting picture in many instances, we must not overlook the continuing disparities between states on multiple fronts. When it comes to learning, states continue to progress at very different speeds.

Millions of Class 3 children in India still cannot read Class 2 level texts.

The outcomes are a function of not just individual abilities. The environment in which children are learning plays a crucial role.

The data on the percentage of schools complying with pupil-teacher ratio norms as specified in the RTE (Right to Education Act, 2009) is revealing. In Andhra Pradesh, it is 82.9%. In Bihar, the corresponding figure is 63.1%.

In Nagaland, only 46% of schools have girls' toilets that are available and usable. The national average is 72.2%. While everyone loves champions, the data on the percentage of schools with weekly time allotted for physical education for every class is revealing.

In Maharashtra, it is 97.5%, in Kerala, it is 93.1% and in Nagaland, it is only 35.8%.

Take digital tasks. The latest ASER data shows that access to smartphones is less and less of a constraint. "Most rural households already have a smartphone. Getting a second phone may be easier for many families in times to come," says the report.

But when it comes to how they are used, and by whom, it is a mixed picture.

India's rural teens use smartphones more for social media, and less for education. There are huge variations between states on digital skills. In Kerala, 94.8% of children between the ages of 14 and 16 can set an alarm on their smartphone. In Andhra, the corresponding figure is 86%; in Uttar Pradesh it is 73.5%. Move to Assam, and the figure dips to 73.7%; in West Bengal, it is only 60.3%.

An important revelation is the gender gap in digital literacy. In digital tasks like setting an alarm and browsing for information, boys (14-16) fare better than girls, though the gender divide on this score is much narrower in southern states like Kerala. Overall, boys (14-16) are also more aware of digital safety features than girls in the same age group. Only 50.3% of girls among those surveyed knew how to make a profile private, against 60.3% for boys, underscoring the urgent need for gender-sensitive digital safety education.

The latest ASER report gives us a reason to celebrate. But it is important to celebrate with caution. While celebrating the outcomes of investments in foundational skills, we must not lose sight of the knowledge and performance gaps that remain and the ground-level work that needs to be done to strengthen the foundation.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee @gmail.com.

Delhi's gender budget: its decline and impact

While freebies and cash transfers, just before the election, can bring in immediate relief to families, what the women voters of Delhi really need are concrete steps that can enable systematic growth in the economic and social empowerment of women

ECONOMIC NOTES

Shabana Mitra
Cledwyn Fernandez
Anjhana Ramesh

There are 71 lakh women voters in Delhi, which is nearly half of the total electorate. Further, women have a high turnout rate as well. So, it is no surprise that all contesting parties provide incentives tailored towards women. These incentives then come to light through the budget. Over the last decade, the overall budget for Delhi has increased from ₹271 billion to ₹760 billion. But, how much of this budget is reserved for women?

Investing in women

Overall, the gender budget of Delhi has witnessed a seven-fold increase from ₹10 billion in 2011-12 to ₹71 billion in 2024-25 (Figure 1). While providing financial assistance to women and child development is essential to reduce the gender gap, it is equally important to invest in other components like, education and health. Investments in education have multiplier effects and lead to long term benefits by generating a highly literate and skilled workforce for the country. Education of women, particularly, can bridge the gender gap in employment and achieve wage parity. What is needed is not freebies but concrete steps that can enable systematic growth in the economic and social empowerment of women.

The neglect towards the education of women by Delhi is concerning. The spending on women's education in the gender budget stood at ₹2 billion in 2011-12, which increased to ₹18 billion in 2024-25. This budget reached its peak in 2017-18 touching ₹24 billion. Since then, the budget allocated for women's education has steadily declined. For the last five years, the education budget has reported a negative growth, with exceptions for 2019-20 and 2023-24

(Figure 2). Another surprising fact is that the education budget made up 54% of the gender budget in 2017-18, but steadily declined to a mere 27% in 2024-25 (Figure 2). Concerningly, there was a massive decline of 9% in the education budget in just the past one year. The decrease is not just in the share, but also in the amount allocated to education (see figure 1), indicating that cash transfers and freebies have become the focus of gender budgets.

Priority for women's education

Education and technical training are major pillars for sustainable long-term growth. A lack of investment in the education sector can have negative spillovers into the labour market. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2023-24), compared to the national average of 45.2%, Delhi's female labour force participation stands at 23%, the lowest in India. While most people in

Delhi hold regular salaried jobs according to PLFS (2023-24), most women are working as house helps or cleaners, and men as shopkeepers or salespeople. Clearly, women are working in the lowest end of the skill spectrum. These jobs offer poor pay and low standard of living. Thus, low investments in female education lead to a relatively smaller female workforce, lower skill levels and low paying jobs. Secondly, the lack of a skilled women workforce can also lead to high gender inequalities in the labour force. As of 2023-24, the gender gap in labour force participation for Delhi stands at 51.6 percentage points. Moreover, the gender gap in top roles — legislators, senior managers, and CEOs — is stark, with 94% of these positions being held by men. Women are also underrepresented in high skilled jobs, such as technicians and associate professionals. Only 3.8% of the female labour force are in these jobs

compared to 10.34% of the male labour force. This points to the fact that investments in education are needed to bridge the gap in the high skilled workforce.

Third, the lack of technical and professional education of women has led to the concentration of women in certain fields. Most women professionals are in the teaching and health sector. It is crucial, therefore, to promote technical education training and professional courses among women to close the gender gaps in various sectors.

Cash transfers are necessary for relief but for empowerment of women, education and training are of utmost importance. Improving the budget for women's education would greatly reduce the gap in the long run.

The writers are with ICRIER, an economic think tank based in Delhi. The views expressed are personal.

Need to focus on education

The neglect towards the education of women by Delhi is concerning. The spending on women's education in the gender budget stood at ₹2 billion in 2011-12, which increased to ₹18 billion in 2024-25. This budget reached its peak in 2017-18. Since then, the budget allocated for women's education has steadily declined.

Chart 1: Total gender budget and its share of education

Chart 2: % change in the share of education in the gender budget
■ Increase ■ Decrease ■ Total

Chart 3: Proportion of education in the gender budget

THE GIST

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While providing financial assistance to women and child development is essential to reduce the gender gap, it is equally important to invest in other components like, education and health.

▼

The budget allocated for women's education in Delhi has steadily declined. For the last five years, the education budget has reported a negative growth, with the exceptions for 2019-20 and 2023-24.

▼

The lack of technical and professional education of women has led to the concentration of women in certain fields. Most women professionals are in the teaching and health sector.

शिक्षा की गुणवत्ता बढ़ाने की चुनौती

गिरीश्वर मिश्र

डिजिटल, वर्चुअल एवं एआइ की ओर झुकाव के दौर में मानविकी विषयों की उपेक्षा असंतुलन को जन्म दे सकती है

बहुत बड़ी है स्कूली शिक्षा की चुनौती ● एएनआइ

यह किसी से छिपा नहीं कि शिक्षा समाज को योग्य और समर्थ बनाने की दिशा में कितनी महत्वपूर्ण है। शिक्षा के परिसर एक परिपक्व और सृजनशील मनुष्य बनाने की प्रयोगशाला होते हैं। वहां विद्यार्थी जीवन मूल्यों की दीक्षा पाता है। उसके व्यक्तित्व की बनावट भी बहुत हद तक वहीं होती है। चूंकि भारत में शिक्षा ऐतिहासिक रूप से अनेक चुनौतियों से घिरी रही है, इसलिए उसकी समस्याएं इकट्ठी होती गई हैं। भारतीय राजनीति शिक्षा के प्रति अलग-अलग नजरिये से संवेदनशील रही है। फलतः शिक्षा में प्रत्यक्ष-परोक्ष रूप से राजनीतिक प्रयोग होते रहे हैं। चूंकि शिक्षा समाज के वर्तमान और भविष्य, दोनों से जुड़ी रहती है, इसलिए उसमें राजनीतिक दिलचस्पी स्वाभाविक है। आजादी के बाद सेक्युलर दृष्टि शिक्षा की आधारशिला बनी, जिसने बहुत कुछ जो भारतीय था, उसे भुला दिया, बहिष्कृत कर दिया या घटा-बढ़ाकर विकृत रूप में शामिल किया। शिक्षा की प्रक्रिया को पश्चिमी दुनिया के अनुकूल बनाने और उसी के पैमाने पर चलाने का उद्यम चलता रहा। औपनिवेशिक काल में ज्ञान और संस्कृति के एकल प्रतिमान के रूप में जो अंग्रेजियत स्थापित हुई, वह वर्चस्व बनाती गई। स्वतंत्र भारत में अपनाई गई शिक्षा की नीतियां, योजनाएं, प्रविधान और उनका कार्यान्वयन प्रायः पुरानी लीक पर ही होता रहा। स्वतंत्रता के बाद अपनाए गए पश्चिमी माडल से हम उबर नहीं पाए हैं। थोड़ा बहुत हेरफेर कर काम चलाते रहे। परिणाम यह हुआ कि भारतीय शिक्षा के समग्र, समावेशी और स्वायत्त स्वरूप विकसित करने की बात धरी की धरी रह गई।

अमृतकाल में भारत ने 2047 तक देश को विकसित करने का संकल्प लिया है, ताकि आर्थिक, सामाजिक, सांस्कृतिक और जीवन की गुणवत्ता की दृष्टि से देश की सामर्थ्य में अभिवृद्धि हो और वह विकसित राष्ट्रों की श्रेणी में पहुंच जाए। कई वर्षों से शिक्षा पर देश के बजट में छह प्रतिशत खर्च करने की बात होती रही है, परंतु वास्तविक व्यय तीन प्रतिशत भी कठिनाई से हो पाता है। विकास के पहिए की धुरी शिक्षा होती है। इसलिए यह राष्ट्रीय नियोजन में उचित महत्व की हकदार है। आज शैक्षिक परिवेश अध्यापकों की कमी और उनकी गैर-अकादमिक आकांक्षाओं से दूषित हो रहा है। पेपर लीक की घटनाएं, शोध में चोरी (प्लैगरिज्म) का चलन बढ़ रहा है। ज्ञान में वृद्धि और नवोन्मेष की जगह दोहराव और कापी-पेस्ट की प्रवृत्ति तेजी से फैल रही है। ज्ञान की कवायद तो हो रही है, पर पढ़ाई की गुणवत्ता घट रही है। खस्ताहाल विद्यालय, महाविद्यालय और विश्वविद्यालय की पढ़ाई नाकाफी हो रही है। उसकी भरपाई करते कोचिंग संस्थान लोकप्रिय और नफे वाला व्यापार बन चुके हैं। इसके दबाव में विद्यार्थियों का मानसिक स्वास्थ्य नकारात्मक रूप से प्रभावित हो रहा है। लोकहित के व्यापक लक्ष्यों के लिए समानता और समता जरूरी है, पर भारत में शिक्षा कई तरह से विभेदकारी होती जा रही है। आज सरकारी, अर्ध-सरकारी और स्ववित्तपोषित संस्थाएं चल रही हैं। उनमें फीस, प्रवेश, पढ़ाई और परीक्षा के तौर-तरीके भी बेमेल हैं। बच्चे को पढ़ाना अभिभावकों के लिए बरसों बरस चलने वाले संघर्ष बन गया है।

केंद्रीय बजट में शिक्षा की बारी बहुत बाद में आती है। दुनिया के अन्य देशों के सापेक्ष शिक्षा के लिए छह प्रतिशत आवंटन की वकालत कई सालों से की जा रही है। देश के 14.72 लाख विद्यालयों में 98 लाख शिक्षक 24.8 करोड़ विद्यार्थियों को शिक्षा प्रदान करते हैं। वित्त मंत्री ने बजट में सभी बच्चों को सौ प्रतिशत स्कूल भेजने का लक्ष्य तय किया है और तकनीकी शिक्षा और शोध विशेषतः कृत्रिम मेधा पर विशेष ध्यान दिया गया है। इसके लिए 500 करोड़ रुपये की व्यवस्था की गई है। इसके अतिरिक्त डिजिटल इंडिया ई-लर्निंग के लिए 681 करोड़ का आवंटन है। मेडिकल कालेजों में 10 हजार अतिरिक्त सीटें होंगी। स्कूलों और उच्च शिक्षण संस्थानों के लिए डिजिटल किताबें देने की तैयारी है। आइआइटी का विस्तार करते हुए पांच आइआइटी के लिए अतिरिक्त बुनियादी ढांचा शिक्षा, रोजगार और कौशल विकास के लिए 1.48 लाख करोड़ रुपये का आवंटन किया गया है। स्कूली शिक्षा की चुनौती बहुत बड़ी है, पर नवोदय विद्यालयों का बजट कटा है। केंद्रीय विद्यालयों, यूजीसी, एनसीईआरटी, केंद्रीय विश्वविद्यालयों का बजट बढ़ा है। उच्च शिक्षा के लिए 7.74 प्रतिशत की वृद्धि हुई है। शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में आवंटन में 6.65 प्रतिशत का इजाफा हुआ है। कुल बजट का 2.5 प्रतिशत आवंटन शिक्षा के लिए है।

आज जनसंख्या की दृष्टि से भारत विश्व में प्रथम हो चुका है, पर संसाधन सीमित हैं। शैक्षिक नेटवर्क और आधार संरचना को बढ़ाने की आवश्यकता है। विश्व में युवा देश के रूप में भारत से आशा बंधती है, परंतु इस युवा शक्ति को नियोजित करना जरूरी है। विश्व-गुरु बनने की उत्कट इच्छा व्यक्त की जाती है, लेकिन युवा वर्ग को सभ्य, सुशिक्षित और दक्ष बनाकर ही हम आगे बढ़ सकेंगे। शिक्षा को देशकाल के अनुकूल एक नैतिक और मानवीय उपक्रम बनाकर ही यह किया जा सकेगा। मानवता को तकनीकी विशेषज्ञों के भरोसे छोड़ना भूल होगी। डिजिटल, वर्चुअल एवं एआइ की ओर झुकाव और मानविकी की उपेक्षा असंतुलन को जन्म दे सकती है। मानविकी, साहित्य, दर्शन और इतिहास भी महत्वपूर्ण हैं, विशेषतः नैतिक और सामाजिक दृष्टि से समृद्ध करने के लिए। भारतीय शिक्षा को इन सभी दृष्टियों से सुदृढ़ किया जाना चाहिए।

(लेखक पूर्व कुलपति हैं)

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LEARNING WITH AI

Schools must find ways to use it to assist, not replace, natural learning

AMEETA MULLA WATTAL

THE OVERARCHING THEME at the recently concluded World Economic Forum in Davos was "Collaboration for the Intelligent Age". What does this mean in the context of educating children? The idea of humanity, nature, and AI in harmony at a platform like Davos can create transformative opportunities when we apply them to schools.

The challenges that confront societies today are existential. Are the learning systems in schools nurturing students to find their highest potential, which will help resolve these challenges? Schools need to embrace equity, ecosystemic understanding, and AI awareness and enablement. This goes beyond future readiness and even literacy.

Eckhart Tolle has written of the flowering of human consciousness through a shift in education, where we should combine intelligence and consciousness. Intelligence is the ability that helps us apply knowledge, solve problems, and adapt to new situations. It also enhances reasoning, decision-making, and memory; in fact, it is a blend of artificial and biological (human) intelligence systems. Consciousness brings in metacognition, introspection, imagination, emotions, and sensory perceptions, which are tied to humans.

Schools have to ensure that human consciousness becomes integral to the connections between intelligence and learning. Only then will we be able to develop a shared un-

> Educators have anticipated the importance of AI for over a decade, but the impact in schools was felt only with the launch of ChatGPT. Students showed great enthusiasm for the opportunities the tool offered. The response of educators to this has been slow and hesitant because the technology carries immense implications in the space of learning.

derstanding of citizenship, interdependence, and mutual interest. This will build cohesive societies, bring in social and economic institutions, and integrate universal values and processes, which can only be learnt in a school.

AI has forced itself into the education agenda as never before, and the responses are still emergent and unclear. What is clear is that every child, irrespective of place or status, must have access to adaptive learning and AI. Educators have anticipated the importance of AI for over a decade, but the actual impact in schools was felt only with the launch of ChatGPT. Students showed great enthusiasm for the opportunities the tool offered — using it to support homework, research papers, projects, case studies, and other academic tasks. They were able to make submissions without any effort or understanding. The response of educators has been slow and hesitant because the technology carries immense implications in the space of learning. Teachers are particularly nervous about AI hallucinations.

It is clear from UNESCO's reviews that very little work has been done to reassess the competencies needed by teachers to understand and use AI for teaching and learning, personalising data for their professional growth, determining how students are learning, and identifying content that excites or disengages them. We need to create learning ecosystems by fostering collaborative relationships with the surrounding community, especially parents and other government agencies. For this we must unlock the learning assets of communities and engage with stakeholders beyond the education sector.

In order to prepare for a brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible (BANI) future — as formulated by anthropologist and futurist Jamais Cascio — schools will have to do scenario planning without making a commitment to any particular prediction. We must imagine several futures simultaneously. All will be plausible. Let us equip ourselves to make decisions that will be robust no matter what future comes to pass.

The real hope for enduring change in schools lies with students. They are connected to the future in ways that no adult is, for in the words of Khalil Gibran, "Their thoughts dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams."

As we move forward as educators, let us continue to refine our vision and get a clearer awareness of a constantly changing reality. We have to evolve institutions and practices that assist, not replace, the natural learning process through collaborative intelligence.

The writer is chairperson and executive director, Education, Innovations and Training, DLF Foundation Schools and scholarship programmes

Learning steps

India must further strengthen its investment in school education

Besides some high-profile announcements, such as an AI Centre of Excellence for education with an allocation of ₹500 crore, broadband connectivity for schools, the expansion of five third-generation IITs, and increased funding for Indian knowledge systems, Budget 2025 has promised higher allocations for education compared to last year's revised estimates. There was a 7% increase for higher education, although the actual expenditure for 2023-24 was 10% more than the 2025-26 Budget estimates. A key challenge in higher education is that the ambitious UGC reforms, modelled on advanced nations, require significant funding. For instance, introducing four-year degree programmes, allowing students to take courses across multiple institutions, implementing bi-annual admissions, and other structural changes demand substantial finances, which will inevitably fall upon State governments. However, Budget 2025 does not appear to adequately address these financial concerns. The release of the ASER 2024 report in the same week as the Union Budget highlighted gaps in India's school education system, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). While the report indicated that learning losses from the COVID-19 pandemic have been recovered, and, in some cases, FLN levels are at their highest ever, India still has some way to go before achieving full FLN, the 2026-27 target under the NIPUN Bharat scheme.

Compared to the 2024-25 revised estimates (RE), school education has been allocated an additional ₹11,000 crore, a 16% increase. However, as a percentage of the total Budget, this increase is only 0.12 percentage points, bringing the allocation to 1.55%. In higher education, the Budget fraction remains unchanged at 0.99%. While institutions such as Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan continue to receive significant funding, the increase does reflect higher inflows to States, which are the primary implementers of school education programmes. The Centre has been keen on fully implementing the National Education Policy (NEP), which proposes a 5+3+3+4 system that includes five years of early education up to Class 3. Early education is being prioritised as the key to achieving full FLN, but a critical gap remains: the two years before Class 1 are managed by underpaid anganwadi workers, who are already overburdened and often lack adequate training to deliver on FLN goals. A focused FLN drive is pivotal to achieving full FLN, a prerequisite for building a highly skilled workforce and leveraging India's demographic dividend. Over the next few years, depending on the progress made, the government must further strengthen school education investments to ensure India meets its full FLN target. Time is of the essence.

AI'S IMPACT ON CLERICAL WORK:
UPSKILL NOW OR FALL BEHIND

By embracing continuous learning and digital transformation, professionals in declining roles can shift to new opportunities in AI-driven jobs

ANINDITA ACHARYA

Back in the '90s, being a secretary, especially while studying, was a solid gig. It covered pocket money and doubled as a crash course in getting a taste of the corporate world. Scheduling meetings, managing emails, reminding the boss of key dates and keeping online documents in order were all part of the job. Fast forward to today and AI-driven apps like Todoist, Microsoft To-Do, ClickUp, and Taskade are taking over. These smart tools handle scheduling, data management, and customer queries with ease, making task and time management smoother than ever.

By now, it's no secret that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is here to stay, growing stronger each day. The world is changing fast, and AI is at the heart of it, shaping industries from healthcare to the job market. In recent years, jobs have evolved rapidly and the coming years will bring even more shifts. Some roles will disappear, while new ones will emerge. The Future of Jobs Report 2025 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) highlights a sharp decline in clerical jobs due to automation. Roles like postal service clerks, bank tellers, data entry clerks, cashiers, ticket clerks, administrative assistants, and executive secretaries are becoming less relevant as digitalisation takes over. The report also provides key insights into emerging and declining careers, predicting a net addition of 78 million jobs globally by 2030.

If you're currently in one of these roles, you have two choices—either blame technology for taking away jobs or upskill and adapt to AI to carve out a new role for yourself. However, access to AI training continues to remain a challenge in our country. Over 95% of employers and 93% of workers in Asia report facing at least one barrier to AI skills training. Employers often lack the knowledge to implement AI workforce training programmes, while employees struggle to find the right AI training opportunities for their needs.

Vivek K Singh, Chairman and CEO, Careerera, admits that roles like cashiers, data entry clerks, and administrative assistants are among the clerical jobs that are declining rapidly. But he also instills hopes that workers in their fields can upskill in order to remain competitive in the changing job market. "Numerous specialised courses are assisting people in advancing into in-demand professions. Specialised courses like cybersecurity and cloud computing are crucial for anyone wanting to enter the growing field of digital security and IT administration. Learning digital and AI skills through courses in AI, data science, and machine learning can lead to data-centric employment. Additionally, courses in python, full-stack development, and blockchain technology help professionals to shift into tech-based careers, while upskilling in project management, digital marketing and business analytics provides opportunities in business and management. Professionals can also leverage AI tools like ChatGTP and Jasper AI for administrative support and content creation. They can learn Tableau and Power BI for data analysis, and UiPath and Automation Anywhere for process automation to further improve their employment prospects," he said.

A July 2023 labor report by McKinsey stated that up to 30% of work hours in the US could be automated by the end of the decade. In today's AI-driven world, staying updated isn't a choice—it's a necessity. As AI takes over routine tasks, human-centric skills like critical thinking, creativity, and time management become even more valuable. Employers should be encouraged to focus on soft skills and build a diverse skill set instead of relying on a single niche. This way, if AI impacts one job area, there are other opportunities to explore. Rather than seeing AI as a threat, it's important we engage with it. Learn how AI tools can enhance your work instead of replacing it. For example, data entry operators can upskill by taking courses on data analytics, Google Sheets, ChatGPT integration in Excel, and AI-driven data aggregation. In the AI era, adapting and upskilling is the only way to stay relevant—because if you don't embrace Generative AI in your role, someone else will.

Jaideep Kewalramani, COO and Head of Employability Business, TeamLease Edtech, mentioned how by embracing continuous learning and digital transformation, professionals in declining roles can pivot toward new opportunities in AI-enhanced roles. "It is important to know about toolkits for AI scheduling (Clockwise, Motion), transcription tools (Otter), and note-taking AI (Evernote), which can help professionals shift to virtual administrative roles. Also, improving communication and soft skills will help with developing customer service expertise. This skill can be used for managing AI chatbots like Drift and CRM software like Zoho," he said.

Getting ready for an AI-driven future is all about upskilling, reskilling, staying informed, and staying flexible. AI isn't here to take over. It's just changing how we work. The sooner we learn to work with it, the faster we'll grow in our careers.

> Getting ready for an AI-driven future is all about upskilling, reskilling & staying informed

Rekindling Gandhian values in education

J S RAJPUT

The erosion of Gandhian values—commitment, sacrifice and service — has led to a disconnect between education and its moral and social responsibilities

Educational endeavours in India immediately after independence were initiated in a hurry to achieve too much in too little a time, and that too, under a severe paucity of human and materialistic resources. This has proved too costly in the long run to the nation, as it now suffers non-functional schools, absentee teachers and proxy teachers.

My interpretation would be that our teacher preparation institutions have either ignored, forgotten, or failed to appreciate the importance of the values that brought the entire nation together? It was the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that had generated commitment, dedication, sacrifice, caring for others and devoting entire life to the nation. These are generally referred to as the Gandhian Values in public conversations. Unfortunately, the Gandhian values were neglected practically in every sector, as the generations managing the nation changed. The expectations from teachers and education have always been very high, they are supposed to set standards, norms, practices, morals, ethics and values. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of disappearing values did not spare the education systems and teachers.

Eminent educationist D. D. Kothari puts it: "The basic task of education – education at all levels –is to promote powers of mind, acquisition of special skills, and advancement of knowledge, but above all, to generate in the young generation a sense of purposefulness and mission, dedication, confidence in themselves and faith in the country's future. To underscore the significance of moral education and promotion of an abiding sense of ethical values and social responsivity as integral element of education in any society, secular or otherwise." This sentence deserves to be read a couple of times, and more than that, should generate an intensive process of continuous 'Manan' and then interactive discussions; 'Chintan'. This needs a serious rethink, which could begin from schools and projected to institutions of higher learning also. To bring this point into the current context of the 21st century, let me digress to return to a focal point. One outstanding person who envisioned post-independence education in India in its totality of the past and present, and simultaneously envisioned its future, Dr D.S. Kothari, was a great physicist, researcher and legendary educator.

His deep insight into spirituality and the Indian tradition of generating, transferring and utilising knowledge, and the inherent objective of utilizing it for people's welfare made him extraordinarily suitable for the task that he performed as the Chairperson of the National Commission on Education (1964-66).

It is impossible not to be impressed by his articulation, pragmatism and vision. For India, his prescription for the future was also expressed in some of such orations in very simple yet meaningful terms. "STPG"? Yes, India and Indian education need to concentrate on 'Science, Technology, Production; and Gandhi'! It was certainly more than five decades ago when this approach stirred my thought process and inspired my keen desire to comprehend it in modern times, in a situation overwhelmed by western education, thought and culture. The Kothari prescription meant deep familiarity with Indian tradition, culture, the intrigues it suffered, and an incisive analysis of Western knowledge systems, without any prejudice or 'pre-conceived admiration only'!

It may sound personal, but listening to Professor Kothari changed my reading interests and transformed my entire approach to educational change.

Unfortunately, the Gandhi part of the quartet –STPG - proposed by Dr. Kothari never received the attention to the extent it deserved. This neglect of the Gandhian values is visible right from schools to universities, -exceptions apart! If one broadens the horizons, it would be obvious that its impact extends far and wide. In simpler terms, one may ask: did India ignore the basic purpose of education?

Within the education system, if one dwells deep into the implications, the focus will always be on the teachers.

The ultimate goal of all of us -and our religions - is the same. It deserves to be repeated that practically every Indian teacher in a government school teaches multi-religious classes, and hence, he ought to be best equipped -and convinced - of the beauty of the diversity of various types and dimensions that nature has bestowed on Indians, including religious diversity.

The teacher who acknowledges his responsibility as the creator of a united, integrated and cohesive future of India, needs to be aware of the treasure of the great Indian scriptures all of which are not necessarily religious but act as the guide for a 'contented, contributing and creative' life. A teacher must be free from prior prejudices and biases. Those who are keen on this front could take guidance from an address that Mahatma Gandhi had delivered to the students and teachers of the Banaras Hindu University: "Early in my childhood I have felt the need of a scripture that would serve me as unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life.

Today the Gita is not only my Bible or my Koran; it is more than that – it is my mother." A large number of Institutions are engaged in in-depth research and serious studies on IKS- Indian Knowledge System. One expects that irrespective of misinterpretations of secularism these studies would not ignore the importance of ancient Indian scriptures and their contemporary relevance.

(Professor Rajput works in education social cohesion and religious amity. He is an Atal Fellow with the PMML, New Delhi)

> THE TEACHER WHO ACKNOWLEDGES HIS RESPONSIBILITY AS THE CREATOR OF A UNITED, INTEGRATED AND COHESIVE FUTURE OF INDIA, NEEDS TO BE AWARE OF THE TREASURE OF THE GREAT INDIAN SCRIPTURES ALL OF WHICH ARE NOT NECESSARILY RELIGIOUS BUT ACT AS THE GUIDE FOR A 'CONTENTED, CONTRIBUTING AND CREATIVE' LIFE

उच्च शिक्षा की गुणवत्ता से खिलवाड़ रुके

प्रो. रसाल सिंह

अगर उच्च शिक्षा को बचाना है तो संघ लोक सेवा आयोग की तर्ज पर भारतीय उच्च शिक्षा सेवा शुरू की जानी चाहिए

यूजीसी के नए ड्राफ्ट रेगुलेशन पर उठते सवाल ● फाइल

पि छले दिनों केंद्रीय शिक्षा मंत्री धर्मेंद्र प्रधान ने विश्वविद्यालय अनुदान आयोग-यूजीसी के अध्यक्ष प्रो. एम. जगदीश कुमार की उपस्थिति में ड्राफ्ट रेगुलेशन-2025 जारी किया। यह उच्च शिक्षण संस्थानों में शिक्षकों और अन्य शैक्षणिक कर्मियों की नियुक्ति एवं प्रोन्नति संबंधी न्यूनतम अर्हता सुनिश्चित करने और उनकी सेवा शर्तों, शिक्षण एवं शोध कार्यभार, पेशेवर आचार-संहिता आदि से संबंधित है। इस मसौदे पर प्रतिक्रिया के लिए शिक्षकों, शैक्षणिक प्रशासकों और छात्रों आदि हितधारकों को एक माह की समयसीमा दी गई है। देश में अभी तक रेगुलेशन-2018 को ही लागू करने की कवायद जारी है। इसलिए यह अवसर यूजीसी रेगुलेशन-2018 की विसंगतियों को दुरुस्त करने का था। उच्च शिक्षा क्षेत्र में दूरगामी दृष्टि और नीतिगत निरंतरता अत्यंत आवश्यक है। रेगुलेशन-2018 की विसंगतियों/समस्याओं पर विचार करने और उनका समाधान करने के लिए कई साल पहले एक समिति बनाई गई थी, लेकिन आज तक उस दिशा में कोई प्रगति न होना निराशाजनक है।

उक्त मसौदे में प्रतिभाओं के संरक्षण और प्रोत्साहन का दावा तो है, लेकिन उसका कोई विश्वसनीय रोडमैप नहीं दिखता। ड्राफ्ट रेगुलेशन में शिक्षकों की नियुक्ति में स्नातक और स्नातकोत्तर के विषय की महत्ता घटाते हुए पीएचडी वाले विषयों में नियुक्ति की छूट दी गई है। यह निर्णय अकादमिक जगत में अराजकता बढ़ाएगा। यह विषय विशेष से पढ़े हुए अभ्यर्थियों को अन्य विषय में शिक्षक बनने का रास्ता खोलेगा। चार वर्षीय स्नातक करने वाले छात्रों को भी कालेजों/विश्वविद्यालयों में शिक्षक बनने का अवसर देने से भी अकादमिक गुणवत्ता घटेगी।

रेगुलेशन-2018 में विश्वविद्यालय में शिक्षक बनने के लिए पीएचडी की अनिवार्यता का प्रावधान किया गया था, क्योंकि ऐसे शिक्षकों को अध्यापन से अधिक शोध-कार्य करना होता है। अब पुस्तक के अध्यायों को शोध-पत्रों के समकक्ष दर्जा दे दिया गया है। यह चिंताजनक है। अभ्यर्थी की विभिन्न अकादमिक परीक्षाओं के अकादमिक परिणाम, शोध-कार्य और प्रकाशन आदि को महत्व देने और साक्षात्कार की भूमिका सीमित करने के संबंध में भी कोई पारदर्शी, वस्तुपरक और न्यायसंगत नीति नहीं बनाई गई है। चयन समिति केंद्रित नियुक्ति-प्रक्रिया को तो तोड़ा-मरोड़ा जाता रहा है। अभ्यर्थी की अकादमिक उपलब्धियों को नजरअंदाज करते हुए अस्पष्ट और अमूर्त मानकों के आधार पर उसके मूल्यांकन का अधिकार चयन समिति को दिया गया है। अकादमिक उपलब्धियों संबंधी वस्तुपरक एवं सुपरिभाषित मानदंडों के स्थान पर नियुक्ति-प्रक्रिया को चयन समिति केंद्रित बना दिया गया है। प्रकाशन की गुणवत्ता के निर्धारण से लेकर अंतिम चयन तक वही सर्वशक्तिमान होगी।

अकादमिक दुनिया जातिवाद, क्षेत्रवाद, भाई-भतीजावाद और परिवारवाद से ग्रस्त है। संपर्कों-संबंधियों और लेन-देन के अभाव में योग्यतम अभ्यर्थी अनदेखी के शिकार होते हैं। यह स्थिति बदलनी होगी। अगर उच्च शिक्षा को बचाना है तो संघ लोक सेवा आयोग की तर्ज पर भारतीय उच्च शिक्षा सेवा शुरू की जानी चाहिए। केंद्रीय अनुदान प्राप्त सभी संस्थानों को इसके दायरे में लाया जाना चाहिए। इन सभी संस्थानों से रिक्तियों का विवरण मांगकर साल में एक बार विज्ञापन आना चाहिए और एक साथ लिखित परीक्षा और साक्षात्कार होना चाहिए। नियुक्ति में 50 प्रतिशत अधिभार लिखित परीक्षा, 30 प्रतिशत अधिभार समस्त अकादमिक उपलब्धियों और 20 प्रतिशत अभिभार साक्षात्कार को दिया जाना चाहिए। सफल अभ्यर्थियों को मेरिट सूची में उनके स्थान, कालेज/विश्वविद्यालय को दी गई वरीयता और उसके स्थायी निवास-स्थान आदि के समेकित अधिभार के आधार पर नियुक्ति दी जानी चाहिए। सत्र के बीच में कोई रिक्ति आने पर प्रतीक्षा सूची में से नियुक्ति की जानी चाहिए। यूजीसी से अनुदान प्राप्त सभी कालेजों के प्राचार्यों और सभी केंद्रीय विश्वविद्यालयों के कुलपति की नियुक्ति प्रक्रिया को भी केंद्रीकृत करने की आवश्यकता है। इस प्रक्रिया में सामाजिक न्याय के प्रविधानों का भी अनुपालन किया जाए।

ड्राफ्ट रेगुलेशन में कुलपति के रूप में शिक्षाविदों के अलावा उद्यमियों, प्रशासन/पुलिस/सेना के अधिकारियों, कंपनियों के प्रबंधकों आदि को चुनने की भी गुंजाइश है। इनके बजाय अकादमिक प्रशासन में अनुभवी संस्थान-निर्माताओं को ही कुलपति के रूप में चुना जाना चाहिए। संस्थान को विकसित करने वाले दृष्टिसंपन्न कुलपतियों के लिए भी कार्य-समीक्षा के आधार पर दूसरे कार्यकाल का प्रविधान किया जाना चाहिए। उच्च शिक्षा क्षेत्र में तीन आयाम (वर्टिकल) बनाए जाने चाहिए-अभ्यापन/शिक्षण, शोध/अनुसंधान और अकादमिक प्रशासन। शिक्षकों को करियर प्रारंभ करते ही प्रतिभा, योग्यता और अभिरुचि के आधार पर धीरे-धीरे इन तीन में से एक में प्रशिक्षित और विकसित किया जाना चाहिए। हमारे देश में अकादमिक प्रशासन को अत्यधिक हल्के में लिया जाता है और किसी भी आचार्य को प्राचार्य या कुलपति बनाने की रवायत है, जबकि अकादमिक प्रशासन अत्यंत चुनौतीपूर्ण क्षेत्र है। यह विशेषज्ञता, अनुभव और प्रशिक्षण की मांग करता है। राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति-2020 के घोषित लक्ष्य के अनुरूप अगर भारत में अंतरराष्ट्रीय ख्याति के शिक्षण संस्थान विकसित करने हैं तो इस दिशा में दूरदर्शी नीति-निर्माण करना होगा।

(लेखक दिल्ली विश्वविद्यालय के रामानुजन कालेज में प्राचार्य हैं।)
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UGC guidelines need a relook

The opposition to the new draft guidelines of the University Grants Commission (UGC) on the appointments of Vice-Chancellors in state universities has got stronger with the education ministers of six non-BJP ruled states demanding its immediate withdrawal. A conclave of the ministers held in Bengaluru on Wednesday also objected to the imposition of the New Education Policy on states.

It is an unmistakable fact that the new draft guidelines are an affront to the ideas of federalism enshrined in the Constitution and even natural justice. The state universities are creatures of the state legislatures; their infrastructure is created using the money provided by the state budgets and are run on the grants provided by the state governments every year. They are the assets of the people of the states concerned.

The draft guidelines, however, seek to undermine the states' role in the running of the universities by unilaterally stripping them of their say in the selection process of Vice-Chancellors. The selection committee of three members will be nominated by the Chancellor, the UGC and the university, with no representation from the state government, the UGC guidelines say, making a mockery of the established procedure for no worthy reason.

The fact is that the UGC guidelines, a piece of subordinate legislation, get precedence over the state's laws on a subject which the Constitution framers put in the State List of the Constitution but was later moved to the Concurrent List. The government is misinterpreting its power for "the co-ordination and determination of standards in universities" to take over their administration even while regulation of the universities' remains on the State List.

The states are also concerned with one too many recommendations in the draft guidelines which do away with several established norms with respect to eligibility for university appointments. The UGC chairman is on record saying that the body will welcome all kinds of opinions on its proposals. The Union government must prevail over the UGC and ensure that the voice of dissent is given due consideration before it comes out with the final document.

(JITENDRA SINGH) UNION SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY MINISTER

Chandrayaan-4 aims to collect samples from the Moon's surface and bring them back to the Earth. This will align with the timelines of India's other landmark missions

Astrology trap: Stargazing to promote pseudo-science

It was the first class of the astrophysics course that I was teaching. As an introduction to the history of astronomy, I mentioned the fact that till a few centuries ago, astrology was indistinguishable from astronomy. But now, we treat astronomy as a science while astrology is not a science. One of the students immediately took issue with this arguing that astrology was also a science. What was more disheartening was that there were many others in the class who agreed with him. This was a class of students who had spent five years studying science and some of them would go on to have careers as teachers and scientific researchers.

But then, they are not alone. According to a recent report, the business of using astrology for advice and peeking into what the future holds is booming. Technology helps, of course. No longer do you need to go to an astrologer to cast your horoscope and tell you whether your current romantic interest is the one? A few clicks on your favourite astrology app will do it all for you. And these are hugely popular. One Indian app has more than 80 million users who use it to connect with 40,000 astrologers. Though there are about 700 million smartphone users in our country, a majority of the users of these apps are Gen Z – just like the students in my class. Some of these apps have also incorporated AI to give personalised answers.

It is not just the Indians who are flocking to get their horoscopes cast; 70% of Americans believe in astrology. Even in China, which claims to be a socialist country, astrology is wildly popular, especially with young people.

What could possibly explain this recent upsurge of interest in foretelling the future? Of course, technology has made it easier, but that itself is paradoxical. One would imagine that technology (and hence science) would reduce belief in this kind of pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo.

There is something more fundamental that makes humans vulnerable to such beliefs. Humans have always been anxious about what the future holds for them. Before the emergence of homo technicus, natural disasters and the consequent economic and physical distress was the main source of anxiety. But now that we live with the misguided belief that our scientific and technological prowess makes us immune to the vicissitudes of nature, other factors have emerged as causes of mental stress. This is especially true for the younger generation for whom uncertainties about future employment as well as the ability to meet their huge material aspirations cause a lot of stress. Couple these factors with the age-old angst of relationship issues and we get a fertile pool of anxious and gullible users.

The search for comfort during stressful times is natural. Hitherto, religious and social groupings were able to provide it. But with more people leading an atomised existence, these support structures are less common. Many of these astrology apps saw a huge surge in their business during the Covid pandemic when people were isolated and uncertain about the future. This was also the case after the fall of the erstwhile Soviet Union when suddenly social and economic institutions collapsed, and people were very apprehensive about their future. Astrology, tarot reading and other forms of pseudo-science became very popular in the post-Soviet society which seemed to have lost its moorings.

I tried to explain to my students how astrology played on human psychology and selection bias to fool us but to no avail. I even used the example given by the mathematician John Paulos. Horoscopes use the planetary positions at the exact time of your birth. Science tells us that the only way heavenly bodies can have an influence on Earth is by gravity. The force of gravity of Saturn turns out to be less than that of the gynaecologist delivering the child. Thus, the weight of the doctor should have a bigger influence on your life. This evoked some amusement in the class but failed to convince them.

Increasing belief in pseudo-science is, of course, a sign of decreasing scientific temper. Beating thalis and lighting diyas to ward off Covid-19 is just one particularly egregious example of this; oddly this seems to be happening when not only are we using more technology but also when the percentage of our population in schools and colleges, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is increasing.

India is the only country in the world to formally adopt scientific temper in its Constitution: As part of the infamous 42 Amendment, "developing scientific temper and a spirit of inquiry" was added to the Fundamental Duties of our citizens. Alas, it will take much more than an increasing GER or constitutional amendments to promote this goal.

Shobhit Mahajan

Shobhit Mahajan teaches physics at Delhi University
The views expressed are personal

The Centre's V-C

Proposed UGC guidelines seek to snuff out what little authority states have in higher education spaces

JOHN BRITTAS

THE NARENDRA MODI government never misses a chance to condemn the Emergency as a dark chapter in India's democracy. But it continues to rely on contentious legislation framed during that era, notably the 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976, which shifted education from the State List to the Concurrent List. The newly proposed UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025, have sparked a debate, especially regarding the appointment of vice-chancellors (V-Cs). The proposed changes threaten federal principles, erode states' authority in higher education, and pave the way for excessive centralisation.

The draft Regulations propose a sweeping overhaul of the V-C appointment process for state universities, giving chancellors — in most cases, the governors — the right to constitute Search-and-Selection committees. This marks a stark departure from the existing framework, wherein state governments play a pivotal role in the selection process for state universities.

Under the draft, the committee will comprise three members: One nominee each from the chancellor/visitor, the UGC chairman, and the university's syndicate or senate. The committee will recommend a panel of three to five candidates, from which the chancellor or visitor, with sole discretion, will make the final appointment. It removes the requirement for V-C to have prior teaching or research experience, raising fears of politicisation.

The origins of the governor's role as chancellor of universities can be traced to the Wood's Despatch of 1854, which recommended that university chancellors be persons of high station with an interest in the cause of education. Post-Independence, governors retained this, thanks to a political milieu where a single party held sway at national and state levels. However, the rise of multi-party politics created tensions. The inability of elected state governments to effectively supervise their universities has led to myriad administrative challenges. Complications arise when the governor/chancellor diverges from the advice of the Council of Ministers.

Justice V R Krishna Iyer, in the landmark *Maru Ram vs Union of India* (1980) case, characterised the offices of the President and governors as "functional euphemisms". Unfortunately, governors have been resisting such constraints and, sometimes, acting in ways that contradict the state executive.

The Justice R S Sarkaria Commission acknowledged criticism regarding the discretionary authority exercised by some governors in their capacity as chancellors. The Commission on Centre-State Relations, however, took an unequivocal stance on the matter. In its report of March 2010, it underscored the risks of governors serving as chancellors and assuming other statutory positions.

Several states have sought to curtail the governor's role in university governance through legislative amendments, but these attempts have had varying degrees of success. A striking illustration lies in the governor's assent to the Gujarat Universities Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2013, which effectively divested the governor of chancellorship powers. It was Narendra Modi as Chief Minister who brought in the legislation and the NDA government was instrumental in granting the assent. In contrast, similar moves by Kerala and other Opposition-ruled states have been obstructed, with governors either withholding assent or referring such bills to the President.

This writer attempted to introduce a Private Member's Bill in Rajya Sabha in July 2024 — The Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 2024 (Amendment of Article 158). It sought to restrict the governors' role strictly to constitutional functions, preventing them from assuming extra-constitutional roles such as chancellorships. It was denied introduction due to the numerical majority of the ruling coalition.

Recent Supreme Court judgments have conferred primacy to UGC regulations over state university laws, igniting fervent debates on the constitutional relationship between central regulations vis-à-vis state laws. At the heart of this discourse lies the concept of subordinate legislation (delegated legislation — a progeny of executive fiat — which refers to Rules, Regulations, or Orders promulgated by executive authorities under the powers conferred upon them by an Act of Parliament or State Legislature. Granting primacy to delegated legislation like UGC regulations over state enactments impinges upon federalism. While state laws are crafted by elected representatives, delegated legislation originates from executive bodies.

The draft Regulations also seek to institutionalise contractual employment in higher education by removing the 10 per cent cap, accelerating the contractualisation of teaching positions. They also permit Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to recruit up to 10 per cent professionals from industry and non-academic fields as professors of practice, fostering corporate influence in academia while creating a fragmented faculty structure. The trend mirrors ad-hoc recruitment policies, such as Agniveers in the military and lateral entry in civil services, undermining social justice.

What is the Centre's true contribution to the education sector? Even in crucial schemes such as UGC grants for teachers, it has progressively shifted the burden onto state governments — today, states bear nearly 76 per cent of the total expenditure on education.

The draft Regulations are an affront to federalism. The legislative assemblies of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have already passed resolutions calling for a withdrawal, other states will likely follow suit. At a time when India aspires to position itself as a global leader in education and research, the draft Regulations' emphasis on central control threatens to homogenise education, eroding diversity and stifling innovation at the state level.

India's federal structure is its cornerstone, enabling both unity and diversity. It is imperative for all stakeholders to oppose measures that threaten this delicate balance.

The writer is a Rajya Sabha MP from CPM. Inputs from Aneesh Babu

Glaring disconnect

Maths skills must help in real-life situations

THE National Education Policy (NEP) lays stress on interactive teaching and learning instead of rote memorisation so that the knowledge acquired in the classroom can be applied to real-life situations. The focus is supposed to be on preparing the student to face the world with confidence. How much progress has been made on this front in recent years? A study co-authored by Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo shows that being good at mathematics on the go, as witnessed in Indian kids working in the marketplace, does not often translate into classroom arithmetic, and vice versa. Simply put, there is a big gap between intuitive and formal styles of learning that needs to be bridged by fine-tuning the curriculum.

Mastering mathematics is a challenge for schoolchildren from low-income backgrounds worldwide, and India is no exception. Poverty and deprivation force millions of families across the country to make their kids — mostly those who have never been to school — do odd jobs, such as working as street vendors. According to the study, such children can do complex calculations in seconds, and that too unaided, but find it hard to deal with simpler abstract maths taught in schools. Their schoolgoing peers excel at academic maths but fail at basic real-world calculations.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 shows that arithmetic levels of children in the age group of 6-14 years have improved in government as well as private schools. This is a good sign, but it is no less important to encourage kids to go beyond textbooks and hone their skills in practical calculations. Such an approach can go a long way in ensuring successful implementation of the NEP. It can also help in improving the students' employability and competency by making them street-smart rather than mere bookworms or exam warriors. A skilled workforce is a prerequisite for boosting India's socioeconomic growth.

Climate-proofing our classrooms

A recent UNICEF report on the impact of climate change on education, especially school education, has painted a grim picture of the global situation, especially in the poorer countries. It says that at least 242 million students in 85 countries had their schooling disrupted by extreme climate events in 2024. The climate events included heat waves, tropical cyclones, storms, floods and droughts. South Asia was the most affected region where 128 million students faced climate-related school disruptions last year. India accounted for about 55 million of them. East Asia and the Pacific were also badly hit. The report has, for the first time, made a comprehensive analysis of climate hazards that have led to closures and other disruptions of schools and their impact on education up to secondary level. UNICEF had warned last year that many more children will be exposed to extreme climate events in the coming years, and it has now presented more evidence in support of its contention.

The report said heat waves were the biggest threat to schools last year, with Bangladesh, the Philippines and Cambodia experiencing the worst. Countries such as Afghanistan faced multiple hazards including heat waves and floods. El Nino badly impacted Africa, causing both floods and droughts. The report noted that extreme climate events damaged school infrastructure and supplies, made access difficult and created unsafe learning conditions. They also affected students' concentration, memory, and mental and physical health. It is stated that children's bodies are more vulnerable to weather-related crises. The disruptions impacted not only academics; prolonged school closures caused more gender-based violence, and heightened the risk of child marriage and child labour. Girls were more severely affected than boys. The observations are based on data collected from across the world. The situation is set to get worse and there are worrying signs.

> UNICEF underscores action in child-critical sectors, investment in climate-smart learning

What is of greater concern is that governments and administrations are not paying adequate attention to the problem. The report notes that schools and education systems are largely ill-equipped to protect students from the impact of climate events. There are no financial investments and action plans specifically oriented to dealing with climate change in most countries. UNICEF has called upon world leaders to ensure that national climate plans strengthen child-critical sectors such as education and to make greater investment in disaster-resilient and climate-smart learning facilities. Climate resilience should be improved through greater financial investment and there should be greater focus on child education. These are the real challenges that governments should be preoccupied with but unfortunately, they do not get the attention they deserve.

Technology and the challenge of equitable education

Madhav Chavan

is a co-founder of Pratham

In India, the 1990s and the early 2000s were a time of education activities on a mass scale. But results from the nationwide Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys of that period indicated that while enrolment and infrastructure indicators showed a rush to schools, learning indicators pointed to no change. At the same time, computers, mobile phones, and digital technology were making waves. It was a time of many possibilities and promises with digital solutions and businesses. However, it was when the COVID-19 pandemic struck that the digital revolution hit the ground in rural India. This is reflected very well in ASER data.

Smartphone use and rural households

In 2018, nearly 90% of rural households had simple mobile phones and 36% had smartphones. In 2022, the proportion of households with smartphones had risen to over 74% and, according to ASER 2024, it has grown further to 84% this year. While the percentage of children who have access to a smartphone at home is nearing saturation, the proportion of children aged between 14 and 16 years who own a smartphone has risen from 19% to about 31% within a year.

It is not clear from the ASER data whether mothers of young children have their own phones. This ownership of smartphones is important when it comes to use in supporting young children's learning and their own learning.

The main use of smartphones during the pandemic period was that of a carrier of texts, worksheets, and videos, which were a substitute for textbooks. Virtual training sessions had become common too. As the pandemic faded away, the digital skills learned during the period sustained, although some of the practices became less important and a new excitement began to build around artificial intelligence (AI).

The best promise of the digital revolution was,

India lacks a road map in the field of education that allows the promise of technology to be harnessed for those who need it the most

to this writer, in the open and continuing education domain for the underprivileged. The need and the possibilities in India are tremendous. For example, at this time, over 40% mothers of schoolchildren are not schooled or have completed school less than class five. Nearly another 40% are schooled between class six and class 10, and the remaining have completed class 10. Educating mothers so that they can help children is an investment India should make to accelerate and strengthen the education of children.

Over the past 30 years, we have lived through the computer, the Internet, and mobile revolutions, and we are now looking at AI. With every new wave of technology, there is new hope and talk of revolutionising education. By the time the technology becomes affordable, something new and exciting for the privileged shows up on the horizon, but technology has not delivered on its promise where the education of the underprivileged is concerned. One of the biggest constraints is the availability of devices.

But, as ASER 2024 data show, availability of individually owned smartphones is going to be less and less of a constraint. Most rural households already have a smartphone. Getting a second phone may be easier for many families in times to come.

No language barrier

Hardware, without a doubt, is becoming easily available. Language used to be a major impediment. It is not so any more. Writing or dictation in local languages is now possible. Translation from one language to another is easy. All the tools needed for learning are accessible, if you know what to access, where, and how. But what if there was one place in a village – let us call it school – where questions of what, where, and how were answered by an intelligent device?

Access to schools is complete. But school

attendance is still a problem. In a village or a community, some children go to a private school, some to a government school, others to private classes and some do not go to school at all. This is somewhat of a chaotic situation at the level of the village and also at the larger community level, which reflects in the quality of learning in schools.

During the pandemic, in many villages of Maharashtra, a learning programme was broadcast from a vantage point. It should be possible to work out a curriculum and broadcast schedule in villages so that group learning can be organised. Organising new schools in this manner should be possible, although, initially, there may not be many takers.

Every civilisation has created its own schooling system over the last 5,000 years. Teachers and methods in one education system did not work in another, the curriculum in one country was not a good fit in another. That was because civilisations were separated by time, space, culture, and technology. The age of empires and colonialism started integrating civilisations. Although separated by national boundaries, countries today are integrated by science and technology. Education too is an integrating factor. But so is profit. Every technological innovation, barring those promoted by philanthropists as public goods, has to look for a 'for-profit market'. Where profits cannot be made, innovations find limited use.

The prediction that hardware and devices would become inexpensive has come true but the need for a higher order and bigger hardware is growing with the innovations of AI. Will philanthropic investments be enough to help universalise the innovations that could revolutionise education? As a country, India needs to come up with a road map that allows the promise of technology to be harnessed for the benefit of those who need it the most.

Bose: Physicist with a passion for chemistry

DR. SHAMIM HAQUE MONDAL

The centenary of the discovery of the 'boson' (1924) by Bengali physicist Satyendranath Bose has been celebrated throughout the last year. His statistics, the Bose-Einstein condensation, and his role behind the mass-giving Higgs boson are known to all physics and science students around the world. But how many people are aware of his interest in chemistry? He was equally interested not only in chemistry as a subject but also in contemporary research on the subject.

His curiosity was immense. Despite being a leading researcher in theoretical physics, experimental physics, quantum mechanics, and organic chemistry were all his areas of interest. After publishing his groundbreaking research, Bose went to England. While in Germany, he visited the laboratory of the eminent chemist, Hermann Mark. From then on, he developed an inclination to work in experimental chemistry. After returning home, he rejoined the Physics Department of Dhaka University. At that time, he met Sushil Chandra Biswas, a professor of chemistry. He did some work in chemistry with him, which was published in a famous chemistry magazine in Germany in 1927. Two years later, a work on the spectrum of beryllium was published in the renowned Philosophical Magazine.

While at Dhaka University, Bose set up a state-of-the-art laboratory, including an X-ray diffractometer, so that he could do experimental work as well as theoretical science. It was there that he first began working in organic chemistry. His work on sulfonamide compounds was well received at that time. One of his students, P. K. Dutta, worked with him on organic chemistry and obtained his doctorate while he was in Dhaka.

In 1945, he was invited by Calcutta University to accept the post of Professor of Chemistry. Before his arrival. BidhuBhushanBabu had set up a laboratory to work with X-rays, where Bose began working on the synthesis of active organic compounds. Another student, JaduGopalDutta, joined him and synthesized emetine, which is commonly used as an anti-protozoal drug. Under his supervision, PranabandhuDutta worked on the synthesis of several complex organic compounds. He also tried to produce quinine, which could help alleviate the shortage of medicines in this unfortunate country.

Chemical structure of Sulfonamide

A German chemist named Clemens Winkler discovered a new element with silver and sulfur from a mineral called argyrodite. Winkler named it germanium after his country. Since the world's first transistor was made using polycrystals of this germanium, its importance in the business community had increased. Its demand increased further during World War II.

Inspired by the mantra of patriotism, Satyendranath understood that if we were to become self-reliant in science and technology, germanium would also be needed in this country in the near future. But it was in short supply in India. Finally, he brought sphalerite from Nepal with his friend PulinBihariSarkar. Not only that, he wrote several fundamental research papers on how to extract germanium from that ore.

Physicists are usually more interested in physical chemistry, but Satyendranath was the opposite. He loved to do experimental chemistry, especially organic chemistry. It is generally assumed that his special connection with AcharyaPrafulla Chandra Roy and his father's chemical business made him interested in chemistry.

Finally, I will end with a story about one day. Satyendranath met a student in front of the university chemistry laboratory. The student was quite worried - he had been doing an experiment for many days, but the results were not as expected. Satyendranath said, "Do these experiments, then you will get the results, and show the working method to your guide." Unbelievable! This time the results came out right. The student went to his master. Incidentally, his master was Satyendranath's friend Gyan Chandra Ghosh, a renowned chemical scientist and the founding director of IIT Kharagpur. And the student was Pranul Chandra Rakshit.

For those who study Chemistry Honors at the undergraduate level in the country, the name will be familiar, because P. C. Rakshit's 'Physical Chemistry' is an indispensable book. And the amazing Satyendranath was writing the last letter of his life asking for a grant from the central government. Subject: Helium Gas Project. But before he could finish that letter, he passed away.

Devi Kar

To stop cheating in exams, let's teach values, not just police kids...

The strongroom of the bank in which some papers are stored has to be photographed and be under CCTV surveillance round the clock for at least a month. These papers are transported in consignments to the place of their destination and the whole operation must be video-taped each day, till the strongroom is emptied.

This scenario gives the impression that some military strategies and defence measures are being carried out to guard against an impending enemy onslaught. But actually, these are elaborate arrangements to prevent the leakage of question papers and other forms of cheating that occur every year when a large-scale examination is held.

Many people may marvel at the watertight arrangements and appreciate the efforts of the authorities to stop malpractices. However, if we pause to reflect on these precautionary measures and the need for them, we will realise what a pathetic state of affairs we are witnessing. Instead of educating the young to be honest and upright, we spend time and energy on policing them. Perhaps the argument in favour of the precautionary measures is that dishonest practices have gone on for too long and are now too deep-rooted to be effectively stopped. The tragic part is that we did not do anything earlier to stem the tide. But the erosion of self-discipline, integrity and consequently trust, is not limited to our country. This year an international board has ruled that no examiner will be permitted to leave the examination room until all the candidates in all the nine zones have completed their respective exams. It is disturbing to think what the extra hours will mean to examinees who are already under intense stress anyway.

Some years ago, over one case of cheating caused a huge hue and cry. For a long time, it was difficult for the culprit to continue a normal existence in school. Whispers, finger-pointing and boycotting were rife until the incident blew over. I know that this kind of punishing behaviour should not be encouraged but at least there was an awareness of what was wrong and unacceptable. Fast forward to our current times and you plainly see the difference. Cheating has become ubiquitous and it has become the norm.

I noticed the beginnings of this trend when in college, honours students who did not take their "pass subject" seriously, happily cheated from one another during their pass subject exams. They took great pride in the collaborative way they 'wrote' the exams. Then there were times where contests were held on the "creative ways of cheating". A debate topic for high school and undergraduate students was "Dishonesty is the best policy". I remember that people found my indignation over the choice of topic rather amusing.

The whole matter of cheating became an issue of much greater concern during the Covid-19 years, when tests were conducted virtually. Most schools discovered that their students' scores were miraculously and implausibly high. The sad part was that many parents aided and abetted their offspring in their quest for high scores. The roles that adults play in this game are manifold. There are tutors who claim that they were paper-setters and examiners in order to attract pupils. Teachers often divulge question papers of school tests and exams to their private pupils. Come the board exams, the practical paper instructions come to the schools and the science teachers get a sense of the specific experiments the candidates would be required to perform and quickly arrange to have a practice session with their students. Some teachers observe that students spend so much time preparing their "cheat sheets" that they could easily learn the matter with far less trouble. We take these things so lightly that these portray ingenious ways of cheating as part of mass entertainment.

The fact that institutions can be perceived to be dishonest is clearly indicated in the way the boards do not allow them to conduct exams. At one time people could not imagine that teachers could be dishonest, but it would be naive to expect people to repose the same trust in them today.

Now that the state of affairs has been described, if sane people will agree that we need to change it — and the sooner the better. Instead of grumbling about the erosion of values, we must make a determined effort to develop them in our children — right from the pre-primary stage. If every school did this, society would be transformed to a cleaner one. We would be able to look forward to brighter days where there is trust and self-respect.

For this to happen, an overhaul of our mindset, including a total rearrangement of our priorities, is required. Once parents and teachers understand that this means are as important as the goals, the way forward will be easier.

As I write this, an incident comes to mind. Decades ago, a student told me in front of the whole class: "I never cheat in your class because you trust me but Mrs M expects me to cheat and keeps looking over my shoulders suspiciously. So, I get a tremendous thrill cheating under her nose."

At the fag end of my working life, I find myself yearning for those carefree days long, long ago when there was far less policing and far more teaching and learning.

The writer is a veteran school educator based in Kolkata.

Cash for rating: Monitor varsity

The cash-for-rating scam at the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), an autonomous body under the University Grants Commission (UGC), is an unfortunate development in the Indian higher education space. NAAC was set up for awarding appropriate ratings for institutes of higher education based on several parameters.

However, the CBI investigation into the alleged bribery of an NAAC team by Guntur-based deemed university Koneru Lakshmaiah Educational Foundation (KLEF) — also known as KL University — in exchange for an A++ rating for its university exposes loopholes in the system. This incident punctures the credibility of NAAC ratings, which were expected to help students to make informed decisions in choosing their colleges.

The CBI investigation revealed that the institutes can have their preferred members in the inspection panel for as little as ₹50 lakh and exposed the rotten system at the NAAC. Though the NAAC executive council has debarred KLEF from accreditation for five years, the damage was done — for NAAC, KLEF and also students.

Education officials should note that the NAAC's penal action — apart from damaging KLEF's reputation — would also affect the future of hundreds of students who joined KLEF because of the NAAC's faulty rating.

KLEF manages vast educational infrastructure spread across three campuses — one in Guntur and two in Hyderabad — and colleges offering education in nine disciplines and a centre for distance education. It requires huge amounts of money — collected from existing as well as new students — to maintain this educational infrastructure.

If the new student enrolment slows down after this controversy, which is the most plausible scenario, the shortage of funds could affect the quality of education imparted to the existing students in spite of them having no role in this scam.

The UGC should therefore monitor the quality of education at KLEF, and as a long-term solution, devise a mechanism to allow the takeover of the errant education institutes by other well-managed institutions.

From brain drain to brain gain

India requires a multi-pronged strategy to transform into a global study destination not just for its own students but also for international learners

V Ramgopal Rao

The recent Open Doors Report 2024 revealed a telling trend: India has become the largest source of international students in the U.S.; with a record-breaking 3,31,602 students enrolled in 2023-24.

Indian students pursuing higher education abroad are making substantial financial contributions to international economies. In 2022, their direct spending – encompassing tuition fees, housing, and living expenses – was estimated at approximately $47 billion. This figure is projected to escalate to as much as $70 billion by 2025.

While this reflects the ambition and global outlook of India's youth, it raises an important question: Why are so many of India's brightest minds compelled to seek education abroad? India aspires to emerge as a global leader in education and innovation.

Yet, the student exodus underscores significant challenges in our higher education ecosystem. The answer lies in transforming India into a global study destination; not just for our own students but also for international learners. This transformation, however, requires a cohesive, multi-pronged strategy addressing education quality, financial sustainability, institutional autonomy, and capacity building.

Diversified financial model

The core challenge lies in India's disproportionate reliance on tuition fees in privately funded institutions and government grants in public-funded ones as the primary sources of revenue. In globally renowned universities, tuition fees contribute only 15-20% of the total revenue.

In a stark contrast, Indian institutions often rely on tuition for over 80% of their funding. Similarly, government-funded institutions draw nearly 90% of their revenue from public funds. Both models are unsustainable and lack the scalability required to meet the growing demands of the education sector.

Ideally, tuition fees should contribute only 30-40% of total revenues. A sliding fee structure, coupled with merit-based scholarships funded by endowments, can help ensure access to quality education without compromising affordability.

Endowments, a mainstay of global universities, should form 30-35% of the revenue base. Encouraging philanthropy from alumni and corporate donors, supported by favourable tax policies and streamlined regulations, is essential to building these endowments.

Additionally, research overheads can contribute 20-25% of revenues through industry-academia collaborations and global research grants. By prioritising applied research that addresses real-world challenges, institutions can generate funding while making meaningful contributions to society. The remaining 10-15% of revenues can come from alternative sources such as executive education programmes, intellectual property commercialisation, and investments in start-ups.

This balanced approach reduces the financial burden on students while ensuring that institutions have the resources to invest in research, innovation, and global competitiveness.

Capacity and quality

Financial sustainability is only one piece of the puzzle. Scaling capacity and enhancing quality are equally critical. The government alone cannot meet the growing demand for higher education.

Public-private collaboration is central to this effort. Private institutions, supported by Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, must play a greater role.

India needs to establish new world-class universities while upgrading existing ones with state-of-the-art infrastructure. A vibrant research and innovation ecosystem must be built by fostering industry-academia partnerships, increasing R and D funding, and creating mechanisms for monetising intellectual property. Flexible, interdisciplinary academic programmes aligned with global standards can further enhance the appeal of Indian institutions.

To improve the diversity and quality of education, Indian universities should actively recruit international faculty and forge global academic collaborations. Such measures would not only raise the global profile of Indian institutions but also expose students to a truly international learning environment.

Autonomy and accountability

An enabling policy environment is essential to drive these reforms. Institutional autonomy, as emphasised by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, is a cornerstone of this transformation. Universities need the freedom to innovate in curriculum design, resource allocation, and partnerships with global institutions. Autonomy empowers institutions to respond dynamically to changing global and domestic needs, aligning strategies with global benchmarks.

Government policies must also encourage the creation and growth of endowments. Substantial tax benefits and flexibility in fund management can incentivise philanthropy. However, with autonomy must come accountability. Independent audits and professional fund management practices should be mandated to build stakeholder trust and ensure transparency.

Globally, universities are moving toward zero-tuition models sustained by endowments and research revenues. India, too, must aim for a future where quality education is universally accessible, rather than an aspirational privilege.

With these measures, India can reverse the brain drain and position itself as a global hub for education. The goal is not merely to retain Indian students but to attract learners from around the world. The time to act is now. By taking bold, transformative steps today, we can ensure that India's brightest minds not only stay but thrive, and that global talent aspires to call India their alma mater.

A gift horse's teeth

Higher allocations are not enough to boost scientific research

The Budget 2025-26 announcements suggest a potential bonanza for scientific research and development. The Finance Minister outlined ₹20,000 crore budgetary support for developing small modular reactors, with the goal of readying five such reactors by 2033. Another major initiative is the Research, Development, and Innovation fund, included in the Department of Science and Technology (DST)'s expected expenditure. This substantial allocation is expected to benefit start-ups and sunrise sectors, though these remain undefined. The expectation is that private sector entities will receive financial support to boost R&D, a domain historically dominated by government spending. India's R&D landscape has long suffered from low private sector participation. While government funding has driven most scientific advancements, private investment in research has remained inadequate. Currently, private sector R&D contribution is only 36%; overall R&D spending in India was 0.64% of GDP in 2020, the lowest since 1995. Over the last five years, business enterprises have accounted for around 40% of government R&D expenditure. Public sector R&D units allocated only 0.30% of their sales turnover to research, compared to 1.46% by the private sector in 2020-21, according to DST estimates.

The government's ₹20,000 crore infusion hikes the DST's total budgetary allocation to around ₹28,000 crore, over three times last year's allocation and seven times the actual expenditure in 2023-24. These figures are encouraging, but a key concern is whether such massive investments can be effectively absorbed. Despite India's strengths in technology-driven sectors such as fuel, metallurgy, pharmaceuticals, textiles, IT, and biotechnology, returns from core R&D and intellectual property generation are still meagre. Though the government has launched ambitious missions in quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and other cutting-edge technologies, the supporting infrastructure remains inadequate. India still lacks the essential building blocks, chipsets, semiconductor fabs, a skilled engineering workforce, and a strong innovation ecosystem, to fully capitalise on these investments. Without these, the lofty targets set for R&D growth risk falling short. The government must present a clear road map on how private sector entities can access these funds and what tangible benefits the public can expect. Increased funding alone will not guarantee success unless structural bottlenecks are addressed. To truly transform India into a research powerhouse, the focus must shift to strengthening foundational infrastructure, incentivising private innovation, and ensuring long-term, sustainable engagement from industry leaders.

Making examinations less stressful for the students

Till some years ago, I remember waking up to the occasional dream featuring an upcoming exam that I wasn't adequately prepared for, or even worse, that somehow, I had studied for the wrong subject. It is a fairly common dream and is believed to reflect some anxiety that we may be experiencing. Experiencing this particular manifestation of stress is at complete odds with my basic nature as I try to not be anxious even in the most trying circumstances. In fact, I remember going with a friend to see *Jurassic Park* on the eve of an exam as I thought I was adequately prepared. As the father of two teenage girls, one in Class 9 and the other in Class 11, I am not pacing in the corridors awaiting their exam results either. Don't get me wrong, I care deeply about the quality of their education and understand that the assessment process is designed to highlight learning outcomes. It's just that I realised that my role as a parent to school-going children isn't to be my children's personal stress amplifier. The thrust of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's message to students and parents at the annual Pariksha Pe Charcha (PPC) event captures this spirit of the thought that "education is a journey, and exams are just one chapter of the story".

Exams are a snapshot of a child's understanding of academic concepts and their applications. But can one exam truly capture the qualities and attributes that shape a fulfilling life? Today's students face unprecedented pressures, from social media amplifying every achievement to the hustle culture urging them to build empires between classes. The quantification of worth — through likes, followers, and grades has created an environment where stress is magnified. Education should never feel like a spectator sport where our children's efforts are scrutinised like performances on a stage. So, what can we do? As parents, our foremost role is to act as anchors. We must balance ambition with acceptance, encouraging our children to strive while letting them know it's okay to fall short.

Even his staunch political adversaries will admit privately that as an ideator and communicator, PM Modi sets the bar high. Whether it's the Swachh Bharat Mission, International Yoga Day, or the recent Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue, these programmes share a common goal of involving youth — Yuva Shakti — as the main stakeholders at every level in shaping the nation's future. Among such initiatives, PPC, launched back in 2018, creates something rare: a space where anxiety can be voiced without judgment. Students get to engage with the PM and draw the attention of the stakeholders in the entire education ecosystem and the nation. This dialogue-based approach marks a departure from the traditional top-down model of educational reform.

As India opens its doors to foreign universities, the existing education ecosystem also looks to revamp our traditional reliance on singular, high-stakes examinations. Such efforts are fortified through initiatives like Manodarpan, which addresses mental health concerns, and PARAKH, which reimagines assessment methodologies. By integrating credits for non-academic pursuits, Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR) has reimagined a framework that will shape the future of education in India. The development of 360-degree Holistic Progress Cards signals a move toward more nuanced evaluation systems.

But the question remains, can PPC, a programme held annually, single-handedly eliminate the anxiety surrounding exams? PPC attempts a shift in the mindset — to view exams not as life-defining hurdles but as a process. It inspires all stakeholders to take collective responsibility for creating an environment where academic challenges are approached with confidence, resilience, and a sense of perspective. However, beyond the day of PPC, real change requires consistent effort — at home, in schools, and in how we define success and failure. William Blake, in his poem *The Schoolboy*, wrote, "How can the bird that is born for joy, sit in a cage and sing?" Stress, like a cage, stifles potential, and when freed from it, students often surpass expectations and break glass ceilings. When not weighed down by fear, their true abilities shine.

We don't have all the answers, and perhaps that's the point. Our role as parents, teachers, and policymakers is to listen, to let go, and to trust that our children are resilient and stronger than we often believe. We need to recognise that vulnerability is not a weakness and that is what makes us human. Let's celebrate the diverse paths our children take towards success and build the perspective of education as an enriching, empowering, and liberating journey.

Jayant Chaudhary

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बेलगाम होते जा रहे कोचिंग संस्थान

हाल में इंजीनियरिंग और मेडिकल की प्रतियोगी परीक्षाओं की तैयारी कराने वाले कोचिंग संस्थानों में से एक फिटजी के कई सेंटर बीच सत्र में ही अचानक बंद हो गए। इससे लाखों की संख्या में छात्रों की पढ़ाई तो अधर में लटकी ही, अभिभावकों का विश्वास और उनकी वित्तीय स्थिति भी हिल गई। फिटजी के प्रभावित होने वाले केंद्र दिल्ली के साथ-साथ नोएडा, मेरठ, गाजियाबाद, वाराणसी, लखनऊ, भोपाल, पटना आदि शहरों के हैं, जिनमें एक-एक सेंटर में छात्रों का आंकड़ा हजारों तक पहुंच रहा था। लगभग तीन लाख प्रति छात्र सालाना शुल्क वसूलने वाले इस कोचिंग संस्थान ने जेईई और नीट-यूजी की तैयारी कराने वाले कोचिंग संस्थानों के बीच अपनी एक खास छवि स्थापित कर ली थी, पर अभिभावकों के सपनों को पूरा करने और युवा भविष्य को तराशने का काम करने वाले इस संस्थान को अब संदेह की निगाह से देखा जा रहा है। नोएडा पुलिस ने संस्थान के संचालकों के खिलाफ मुकदमा दर्ज करके बैंक खाते सीज कर दिए हैं। जांच के दौरान पुलिस को अलग-अलग बैंकों में फिटजी के सैकड़ों बैंक खाते मिले। कहा जा रहा है कि कई महीनों से वेतन न मिलने की स्थिति में हताश शिक्षकों द्वारा सामूहिक त्यागपत्र के कारण कई सेंटरों पर ताले पड़ गए। छात्रों और अभिभावकों के शोर मचाने पर अन्य केंद्रों से शिक्षकों को लाने के प्रयास किए गए, लेकिन वे नाकाम रहे। इस स्थिति में प्रशासन के पास कोचिंग सेंटरों का संचालन बंद करने के अलावा कोई विकल्प नहीं रहा। कोई ठोस कानून और नियमावली के अभाव में पुलिस एवं प्रशासन अभिभावकों को कोरी सांत्वना के अलावा कुछ भी नहीं दे पाया।

प्रतिष्ठित आइआइटी संस्थानों में प्रवेश की गलाकाट प्रतिस्पर्धा का अंदाजा इससे लगा सकते हैं कि प्रतिवर्ष लगभग 14 लाख के आसपास छात्र आवेदन करते हैं। इनमें से लगभग एक प्रतिशत ही आइआइटी में प्रवेश पा पाते हैं। यह एक अलग विषय है कि प्रतियोगी परीक्षा के दुर्गम होते स्तर से प्रतियोगिता के मुख्य उद्देश्य सर्वोत्तम प्रतिभा चयनित करने की पूर्ति हो रही हो या नहीं, लेकिन इतना अवश्य है कि छात्रों एवं अभिभावकों

कोचिंग संस्थानों को किसी ठोस कानूनी नियमावली के दायरे में लाया जाना आवश्यक हो गया है

डा. तुलसी भारद्वाज

अचानक बंद हुए फिटजी के कई केंद्र • फाइल

की कोचिंग संस्थानों पर निर्भरता बढ़ गई है। जैसी प्रतिस्पर्धा जेईई को लेकर देखने को मिलती है, वैसी ही नीट-यूजी को लेकर भी। कठिन प्रतिस्पर्धा के चलते सतत मानसिक दबाव से जूझ रहे किशोरों में मानसिक अवसाद और आत्महत्या की प्रवृत्ति जैसे बढ़ते विकार किसी से छिपे नहीं हैं। लुभावने वादों के सहारे कठिन प्रतिस्पर्धा को भुनाने वाले कोचिंग संस्थान आज शिक्षातंत्र में विद्यालयों को अप्रासंगिक कर स्वच्छंदता से पनप रहे हैं। इसकी पुष्टि मेडिकल प्रवेश परीक्षा नीट में गड़बड़ी के बाद गठित की गई उच्च स्तरीय समिति की रिपोर्ट से होती है। इस समिति ने अपनी रिपोर्ट में कहा था कि कोचिंग-संस्थानों की कार्यप्रणाली से संबंधित विशेष नीति बनाई जानी चाहिए, क्योंकि उनके द्वारा एक समानांतर शैक्षणिक प्रणाली निर्मित कर ली गई है, जो सीनियर सेकेंडरी स्तर की स्कूली शिक्षा के लिए घातक साबित हो रही है। इस समानांतर प्रणाली के कारण विद्यार्थियों की स्कूली उपस्थिति में भी कमी आई है। बीते दिनों शिक्षा मंत्रालय से जुड़ी संसदीय समिति ने भी शिक्षा संस्थानों और कोचिंग संस्थानों के बीच बढ़ते गठजोड़ पर गहरी चिंता जताई और केंद्र सरकार से दोनों के नापाक गठजोड़ को खत्म करने की सिफारिश की। इस

समिति ने इस पर भी जोर दिया कि कोचिंग संस्थानों के साथ मिलकर काम करने वाले शिक्षा संस्थानों की पहचान कर उनकी मान्यता रद की जाए और उन्हें मिलने वाली वित्तीय मदद रोकी जाए। आज कोचिंग संस्कृति की यह स्थिति है कि छात्र स्कूल जाएं या नहीं, परंतु कोचिंग उनकी दिनचर्या का अनिवार्य अंग बन चुकी है।

2023 में फिटजी का राजस्व लगभग साढ़े पांच सौ करोड़ रुपये दर्शाया गया था। देश में फिटजी जैसे अन्य कोचिंग संस्थान भी हैं, जो मोटा मुनाफा कमाते हैं, लेकिन वे किसी संवैधानिक एजेंसी द्वारा विनियमित नहीं हैं। कोचिंग संस्थानों पर उपभोक्ता संरक्षण एवं वाणिज्यिक कानून भी प्रभावी रूप से लागू नहीं पा रहे हैं। नतीजन समय-समय पर छात्र ठगे जाते हैं। गत वर्ष दिल्ली में एक कोचिंग संस्थान के जरिये सिविल सेवा परीक्षा की तैयारी कर रहे तीन विद्यार्थियों की उसके बेसमेंट में पानी भरने से मौत हो गई थी। इसके पहले शैक्षिक स्टार्टअप बायजूस दिवालिया घोषित हो गया था। कोचिंग संस्थानों के मनमाने तरीके से संचालन से छात्रों को केवल वित्तीय हानि ही नहीं उठानी पड़ती, बल्कि उनके समय की भी बर्बादी होती है। छात्रों के साथ अभिभावकों के सपनों पर पानी भी फिरता है। ऐसे में कोचिंग संस्थाओं की मनमानी को महज आर्थिक हानि नहीं माना जाना चाहिए। इससे छात्रों के भविष्य पर पड़ने वाले दुष्प्रभाव को देखते हुए कोचिंग संस्थानों के अनुचित कार्यों को गंभीर अपराध की श्रेणी में लाया जाना चाहिए। इसके बिना इस समस्या का समाधान संभव नहीं है।

छात्रों और अभिभावकों के विश्वास को मजबूत करने के लिए कोचिंग संस्थाओं को किसी ठोस कानूनी नियमावली के दायरे में लाया जाना आवश्यक है। इस नियमावली में फीस, शैक्षिक गुणवत्ता के मानक, पाठ्यक्रम, स्टाफ का वेतन आदि महत्वपूर्ण बिंदु शामिल होने चाहिए। गुरुओं के देश भारत के शैक्षिक तंत्र की वर्तमान चुनौतियों का सामना किए बिना समाज के महत्वपूर्ण स्तंभ शिक्षक एवं छात्रों के अधिकारों को सुनिश्चित नहीं किया जा सकता।

(लेखिका शिक्षाविद् एवं सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता हैं)

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सपना बच्चे का अपना हो, पैरंट्स का नहीं

प्राची पांडे

स्वामी विवेकानंद ने एक प्रश्न पूछा था और इसका उत्तर भी दिया था, 'क्या आपको लगता है कि आप एक बच्चे को पढ़ा भी सकते हैं? आप ऐसा नहीं कर सकते। बच्चा स्वयं सीखता है। आपका कर्तव्य उसे अवसर प्रदान करना और उसकी बाधाओं को दूर करना है।'

सीखने को प्रेरित करें | हर बच्चा असीमित क्षमताओं के साथ जन्म लेता है। जैसे-जैसे वह बड़ा होता है, अपनी पसंद के क्षेत्रों का अन्वेषण करता है और अपनी रुचियों तथा प्रतिभाओं का विकास करता है। माता-पिता का दायित्व है कि बच्चों में सीखने की इच्छा के बीज बोएं, उनका पोषण करें और उन्हें सफलता की मजबूत और गहरी जड़ों वाले वृक्षों के रूप में विकसित होने में मदद करें।

बच्चे पर भरोसा रखें | 'बोर्ड' परीक्षाओं के वर्षों के दौरान बच्चों के पालन-पोषण में समझदारी चाहिए। बच्चे के आत्मविश्वास में वृद्धि तब होती है, जब माता-पिता उस पर भरोसा करते हैं। उसे उच्च मानक निर्धारित करने में मदद करते हैं। बच्चे जब किसी उद्देश्य और उपलब्धि की भावना से प्रेरित होते हैं तो उनके लिए अपनी क्षमता का एहसास करना आसान होता है।

माता-पिता की भूमिका | अल्बर्ट आईंस्टाइन ने कहा था, 'हर व्यक्ति प्रतिभाशाली है।' लेकिन अगर आप किसी मछली की क्षमता का आकलन पेड़ पर चढ़ने की उसकी योग्यता से करेंगे, तो वह स्वयं को बुद्धिहीन समझते हुए ही अपना पूरा जीवन गुजार देगी।' माता-पिता बच्चे के पहले मित्र और पहले शिक्षक हैं। वे ही बच्चे की क्षमता और रुचियों को जान सकते हैं।

बहुत दबाव न डालें | यह बात सही है कि परीक्षा एक चुनौती है, लेकिन वह अवसर भी है। बच्चे परीक्षा में सर्वोत्तम परिणाम प्राप्त करें इसके लिए उन पर थोड़ा दबाव अवश्य होना चाहिए। लेकिन याद रखें कि अत्यधिक दबाव का प्रतिकूल परिणाम भी हो सकता है। माता-पिता को यह भी याद रखना चाहिए कि बच्चों को जीवन भर उतार-चढ़ाव का सामना करना पड़ता है।

असफलता जीवन का हिस्सा | बोर्ड परीक्षाएं वयस्क जीवन और भविष्य की तरफ केवल पहला कदम है। माता-पिता के लिए महत्वपूर्ण है कि वे अपने बच्चों को जीवन में आने वाली चुनौतियों से निपटने के लिए गुण विकसित करने में सहायता प्रदान करें। माता-पिता के रूप में, हमें बच्चों को यह समझने में मदद करनी चाहिए कि असफलताएं जीवन का स्वाभाविक हिस्सा हैं और वे उनसे सीख सकते हैं। यह कोई सैद्धांतिक अवधारणा नहीं है कि समय के अनुसार ढलना सिखाया जाए बल्कि इसे व्यावहारिक रूप से पालन-पोषण का हिस्सा होना चाहिए।

कौशल सिखाएं | बच्चों को सहयोग देने का अर्थ उनकी समस्याओं का समाधान करना नहीं है, बल्कि इसका अर्थ उन्हें समस्याओं का समाधान करने के कौशल से लैस करना है या फिर उन्हें इसके लिए प्रशिक्षित करना है कि यदि वे पहली बार किसी कार्य में सफल नहीं होते हैं तो उनमें इसके लिए अलग-अलग तरीके आजमाने का उत्साह कायम रहे और वे मैदान में डटे रहें।

माता-पिता न थोपें इच्छा | अधिकांश माता-पिता अपने बच्चों को शिक्षा, खेल या कला के क्षेत्र में सफल होते देखना चाहते हैं। लेकिन सपना बच्चे का अपना होता है और वह माता-पिता की कोई अधूरी इच्छा नहीं होनी चाहिए, जिसे वे उन पर थोप रहे हों। अभिभावक के रूप में बच्चों के साथ खुलकर बातचीत करना और उनकी बात सुनना उनकी वैयक्तिकता का सम्मान करने में सहायक होगा। कोई बच्चा कौन-सी राह पकड़ेगा यह पहले से निर्धारित कर देने से बच्चों को अपनी रुचियों और प्रतिभा को निखारने और पसंद के क्षेत्रों की तलाश के अवसर से वंचित होना पड़ता है। यह अंततः उनके व्यक्तिगत विकास और भविष्य की संभावनाओं के एहसास को बाधित करता है।

तुलना न करें | प्रधानमंत्री नरेंद्र मोदी ने 'परीक्षा पे चर्चा' के 7वें संस्करण में कई प्रेरक मंत्र दिए। उन्होंने एक महत्वपूर्ण मंत्र यह दिया था, 'अपने बच्चे के रिपोर्ट कार्ड को अपना विजिटिंग कार्ड न समझें।' अच्छा या बुरा शैक्षणिक प्रदर्शन न तो बच्चे की विशेषता को परिभाषित करता है, और न ही यह माता-पिता की रेटिंग है। प्रधानमंत्री ने यह भी सलाह दी है कि अपने बच्चे की तुलना दूसरों से न करें।

परीक्षा त्योहार की तरह | हम अब परीक्षा पे चर्चा के 8वें संस्करण की ओर बढ़ रहे हैं। परीक्षाएं कई मायनों में त्योहारों की तरह होती हैं, जिनकी तिथियां और सामाजिक तौर-तरीके तय होते हैं। परीक्षाएं और त्योहार प्रायः मार्गदर्शक के रूप में कार्य करते हैं तथा हमारे जीवन को विशिष्ट उद्देश्य, सपनों को साकार करने की रूपरेखा और भविष्य की झलक प्रदान करते हैं। परीक्षाएं जहां हमें एक समापन का एहसास कराती हैं, वहीं वे नए आरंभ के मार्ग भी प्रशस्त करती हैं। हम बच्चों को उनकी परीक्षाओं के लिए शुभकामनाएं देते हैं और हमें यह विश्वास है कि अमृतकाल के छात्र भारत को कुशल, समृद्ध और विकसित राष्ट्र बनाएंगे।

(लेखिका केंद्रीय विद्यालय शिक्षा एवं साक्षरता विभाग में संयुक्त सचिव हैं)

कॉमन रूम

What has the Budget offered scientists?

The Union Budget for 2025-26 provided an overall and possibly unprecedented thrust on research and innovation, especially in the private sector. The Budget's support for private sector research is expected to accelerate advancements in areas such as gene-editing, personalised medicine, and sustainable agriculture

FULL CONTEXT

T.V. Padma

What does India's 2025-2026 Union Budget spell for India's research ecosystem? The author asked seven scientists and science administrators. Their replies are presented below, edited for clarity. Read the full version online here: bit.ly/scientistbudget

Abhay Karandikar, Secretary, Department of Science & Technology:
The Budget provides an overall and possibly unprecedented thrust on research and innovation by setting aside ₹20,000 crore for the Department of Science & Technology (DST), and towards research in the private sector, including corporates and startups. There is a focused attempt to bring together academia, the private sector, and startups to work on national missions.

The dedicated fund of ₹20,000 crore is part of the ₹1 lakh crore corpus fund announced in the Budget of July 2024 to boost private sector R&D, especially in the deeptech and sunrise sectors. The DST will be the nodal ministry driving this fund. This will be a major step towards creating strategic autonomy in some key technology sectors. The National Geospatial Mission has been allocated ₹100 crore for FY 2025-2026 to develop foundational geospatial infrastructure and data. The mission will help implement the National Geospatial Policy 2022, with the goal of expanding the access and use of geospatial data and making India a world leader in the geospatial sector.

The Finance Minister has announced several initiatives to boost science, and innovation in the country including the Nuclear Energy Mission, clean tech initiatives, Atal Tinkering Labs etc.

Rajesh Gokhale, Secretary, Department of Biotechnology (DBT):
The Union Budget demonstrates a commitment to advancing India's biotechnology sector, which aligns closely with the DBT's objectives. The ₹3,446.64 crore allocation reflects a significant increase of 51.45% from the previous year's allocation.

Recently, the government also approved the 'Bio-RIDE' scheme to foster innovation, promote bio-entrepreneurship, and strengthen India's position as a global leader in biomanufacturing and biotechnology.

The Budget's support for private sector research is expected to accelerate advancements in areas such as gene-editing, personalised medicine, and sustainable agriculture. The proposal for a light-touch regulatory framework based on principles and trust is a progressive step. Aligned with the government's 'Bio E3 Policy' for fostering high-performance biomanufacturing, the National Manufacturing Mission (NMM) announced in the Budget aims to accelerate technology development and commercialisation.

The National Mission on High Yielding Seeds will focus on strengthening the research ecosystem and developing high-yielding, pest-resistant, and climate-resilient seeds. Similarly, some of DBT's initiatives contribute to self-reliance programmes, such as the mission on minor oil seeds. Another is a mission programme on "Characterisation of Genetic Resources", to sequence/re-sequence and characterise available germplasm resources of pulses.
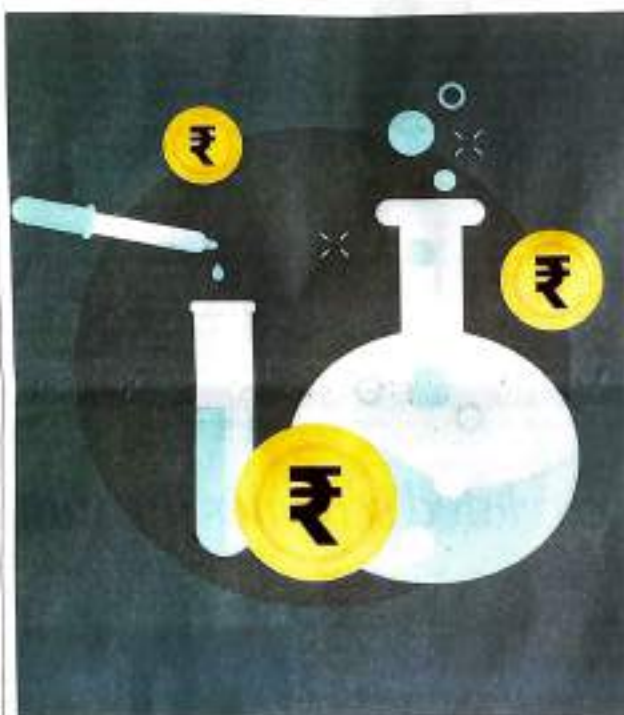
N. Kalaiselvi, Director-General, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR):
The Budget reinforces science, technology, and innovation (STI) as key enablers of national progress, aligning with CSIR's vision of advancing self-reliance and global competitiveness. The Budget's focus on public-private partnerships, industry collaboration, and technology-driven entrepreneurship will accelerate innovation in manufacturing, healthcare, and sustainability.

For agriculture and rural prosperity, CSIR's Aroma and Floriculture Missions align with the Agri-Districts Initiative, promoting value-added farming and boosting farmer incomes. Similarly, CSIR's Millets Mission supports self-reliance in the farming of pulses and oilseeds, ensuring nutritional security and climate-resilient farming. The CSIR Cotton Mission aligns with the National Cotton Mission, strengthening India's position in global textile markets.

The Indigenous Manufacturing and Smart Packaging Missions find synergy with the NMM, driving innovation-led industrial growth. The Green Hydrogen Mission, spearheaded by CSIR, supports the clean energy transition.

For youth-skilling, CSIR's Jigyasa Programme complements Atal Tinkering Labs, fostering STEM education and research exposure. The Seaweed Mission and Learn & Earn Program empowers women entrepreneurs, supporting economic inclusion. Additionally, CSIR's Footwear for Healthcare and India Footwear Sizing Program align with the leather sector's initiatives. This Budget cements CSIR's pivotal role in nation-building and reinforces STI as the foundation for a self-reliant, inclusive, and globally competitive India.

K.S. Parthasarathy, former Secretary, Atomic Energy Regulatory Board:
The Central government's ambitious programme to enhance the share of nuclear power to 100 GWe by 2047 and to invest heavily to support associated R&D is challenging to all stakeholders. Accepting private sector participation in the nuclear sector adds a new dimension to the programme. Success in the project to develop and install Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) is essential in India's energy transition. As per the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), SMRs are nuclear reactors with a power generating capacity of 300 MWe equivalent or less.

The Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) has implemented measures to regulate the safety of VVER Russian reactors, pressurised heavy water reactors of 700 MWe etc, all of which include first of its kind technologies.

AERB's reports to the IAEA Convention of Nuclear Safety reveal how openly and transparently it has been fulfilling its mandate. AERB staff updates its knowledge and expertise in safety-related disciplines associated with new technologies. It has linkages with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the French regulatory agency among others, and exchanges its experience regularly.

C.P. Rajendran, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru:
The Budget infuses significant funding for science and technology and for the DBT, whereas the allocation for the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research is nominal.

The importance of curiosity-driven science doesn't seem to be a major priority. Much of the funding appears directed towards mission-mode programmes such as nuclear energy, AI, private sector initiatives, etc. The government also plans to amend the Nuclear Liability and Damage Act 2010 that makes operators liable for nuclear damage. This will have serious ramifications. Many experts have raised concerns about SMRs.

The Finance Minister also announced the expansion of the Small Industries Development Bank of India Fund for Startups with an additional ₹10,000 crore corpus to enhance the "deeptech ecosystem" in startups focused on AI, biotech, and space technology. India had over 3,600 deeptech startups in 2023. In that year, they raised $850 million, reflecting a 77% decrease from 2022 due to investors' lack of confidence regarding investment returns.

Curiosity-driven research is propelled by scientists' curiosity regarding specific research questions. What I observe is a growing corporatisation of science driven solely by immediate utility. Another critical issue is the rigid bureaucracy surrounding funding, which has created significant problems over the years.

Tapasya Srivastava, University of Delhi, South Campus:
The Budget meets the increasing needs of health research and biomedical devices, given that the Economic Survey recognised the physical and mental harms of ultra-processed food leading to non-communicable diseases.

The percentage increase from the Revised Estimate of 2024-2025 to Budget Estimate of 2025-2026 for Central universities (4.3%) is about half of that given to IITs (8.4%), which is disappointing given the number of students and the overhauling with respect to the National Education Policy (NEP) that universities are going through. These changes require unprecedented support from the government, which is not evident looking at these numbers.

It would have been more meaningful if the Prime Minister's Research Fellowship became an interim research fellowship of a reasonable amount that replaces the abysmally low ₹8,000 non-NET UGC. The PMRF is competitive and, therefore, ends up mostly in labs with sufficient funding.

The AI bandwagon is something that all governments seem to want to rush into. The allocation has come into the Centre of Excellence in AI education and one hopes the Centre sets benchmarks for adoption in a way that truly benefits Indian society, beyond buzzwords.

With a significant number of youth struggling with mental health issues, overall health decline, reduced attention span and consumerism, the unprecedented advantage of a steady government to implement value-based learning and life skills in school education to bring about generational change appears to have been lost.

Soumitro Banerjee, IISER, Kolkata:
The scientific community of India is dismayed to see the low financial allocation to sectors crucial for scientific development. The NEP-2020, adopted by the same government, recommended the expenditure on education be 6% of the GDP, which requires at least 10% of the Union Budget to be spent on education.

But since 2020, there has been no attempt to meet this target. This year the allocation is only 2.54%. This implies that through NEP-2020, the government is trying to change the structure and content of education without improving its quality. The direction of change is clear from the five-fold increased outlay for 'Indian Knowledge Systems'.

Basic science research has taken a backseat as the funding for IISc and the IISERs has been reduced. The UGC, which funds all universities, saw a drastic reduction in its budget last year (from ₹5,360 crore to ₹2,500 crore). Despite some increase this year (33% BE to BE), it is far below the pre-2024 figure.

T.V. Padma is a science journalist.

FIRST COLUMN

WHEN TEACHER FAILS THE STUDENTS

A struggling teacher can hinder a student's motivation and academic growth, sometimes permanently

SAKSHI **SETHI**

The question of whether a teacher's underperformance affects students more than teachers themselves is a complex one. While it may seem that underperforming teachers primarily bear the consequences of their shortcomings such as poor evaluations, job insecurity, and professional stagnation there is significant evidence to suggest that their underperformance also has a profound and lasting impact on students. However, the extent of this impact depends on multiple factors, including the school environment, student resilience and administrative interventions.

While effective teaching is undoubtedly beneficial, some argue that teacher underperformance has minimal impact on students due to various compensatory factors such as student resilience, external learning resources, peer support, and the overall educational environment. Although it is sometimes argued that learners can still learn despite ineffective teaching, research suggests that a teacher's performance plays a crucial role in student outcomes.

Underperforming teachers whether due to lack of subject knowledge, ineffective instructional methods, or poor classroom management can hinder student learning, motivation, and overall academic achievement. Research studies also show that learners with such teachers for consecutive years are more likely to experience learning gaps that persist throughout their education. Moreover, these teachers often fail to provide the necessary support for students to develop critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities and enthusiasm for learning and this can particularly disadvantage students from low-income or marginalised backgrounds who rely heavily on schools for academic and personal development. In extreme cases, a teacher's underperformance can lead to disengagement, higher dropout rates, and a lack of preparation for future

education or careers. While students undoubtedly suffer from teacher underperformance, teachers themselves often experience significant negative consequences as well. Underperforming teachers may face criticism from administrators, colleagues and parents, leading to stress, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Many teachers enter the profession with a passion for education and realising that they are not meeting expectations can be emotionally draining. Additionally, such teachers are more likely to receive negative performance evaluations, which can impact their job security, salary and professional growth opportunities. In some cases, chronic underperformance can even lead to disciplinary action or even job loss. The pressure to improve without adequate support can also lead to burnout, causing teachers to leave the profession altogether. Ultimately, the effects of teacher underperformance are felt on both sides, but the consequences for students can be more lasting and difficult to reverse.

While teachers may struggle with professional setbacks, students who receive inadequate instruction may face lifelong challenges in education and career readiness. Schools must provide struggling teachers with professional development, mentorship, and support rather than simply penalising them. At the same time, policies must be in place to ensure that students do not suffer due to prolonged ineffective teaching. The argument that underperformance affects teachers more than students is not entirely accurate. The role of teachers in shaping student success is widely acknowledged, but the extent to which underperformance affects students remains a debated topic. Today, the presence of a standardised curriculum ensures that learning objectives remain consistent regardless of teacher quality. Moreover, beyond the classroom, students have access to private tutors, educational applications, library resources, and academic workshops. Many education systems do follow structured guidelines that specify what students must learn at each grade level, reducing variability in learning outcomes.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Byte-sized guidance: AI use in mapping emerging opportunities

Araha Hoppvakyu

In India, career guidance has evolved significantly over the past five years, influenced by technological advancements, changing job markets, and a growing focus on skills development. Traditionally, career counselling in India was largely a subjective process, relying heavily on face-to-face interactions with school counsellors, parents, and teachers.

In fact, in smaller towns and rural areas, the concept of career guidance was practically nonexistent. As a result, most students in India were expected to follow paths like engineering or medicine, regardless of their interests, leaving them feeling uncertain and pressured to conform to societal expectations.

With such limited guidance, and with career counseling largely dependent on recommendations based on academic performance, students were often unaware of emerging career fields beyond conventional options. Moreover, this approach was static, lacked real-time insights into students' skills, strengths, and interests, and ultimately, left students unprepared to handle the fast-evolving landscape of industry and technology.

Over the past five years, the analytics industry has evolved significantly. Before 2020, it mainly focused on basic data analysis, with AI tools still in early development. By 2025, AI and machine learning have become key drivers, providing more accurate, real-time insights.

The rapid advancement of AI and data analytics has reshaped nearly every industry, including career counselling, making data collection and interpretation faster and more efficient while offering actionable recommendations that help individuals make decisions based on their skills, strengths, and job market trends. These tools have also become more user-friendly, making insights easily accessible to a wider audience and democratising data-driven decision-making across multiple sectors.

Today, predictive analytics is empowering students to make data-driven decisions about their careers. Traditional career counselling has often relied on subjective advice, influenced by personal opinions and limited data, whereas AI-powered platforms and online tools now provide personalised guidance by analysing a student's skills and interests against real-time job market data.

AI-powered tools process vast amounts of data from sources like job market trends, skills demand, academic performance, and personal interests to predict trends and match students with careers aligned with their skills and emerging market demands. By analysing historical trends, these tools highlight industries with high growth potential and recommend the skills students need to develop, such as upskilling in data science, cybersecurity, or healthcare, based on current job market demands.

Traditionally, curricula and syllabi in schools and universities were primarily shaped by government regulations and educational boards, like CBSE, ICSE, and state boards, with little input from industrial requirements. As job requirements evolved, the curriculum remained exam-focused and teacher-driven, with limited connection to emerging industries. This led to a noticeable gap between what students learned through academics and the skills that are demanded in the workforce.

Today, with the advent of AI and predictive analytics, educational institutions are leveraging these technologies to adapt curricula in real-time based on job market demands and personalise learning for students by offering valuable insights into industry trends, salary expectations, and essential skills that are required to bridge the gap for succeeding in the job market. This allows students to be directed toward the right resources that best support their career trajectory.

In the future, students can leverage AI tools and resources to virtually 'mentor' themselves, analysing career trajectories, skills, and job transitions by accessing a wealth of data on successful professionals in their field. Career paths are likely to become more dynamic and nonlinear, with the continuous evolution of the job market.

AI-driven recommendations for upskilling will help individuals navigate career changes seamlessly. Through forecasting, AI will provide a clearer understanding of the opportunities on the horizon as new jobs are created. For example, AI might predict demand for specific roles in industries like climate tech, space exploration, ethical AI regulation etc.

Interestingly, we could observe that an integrated ecosystem would evolve where students, schools, employers, and AI systems collaborate. AI tools will continuously update students on industry trends, while employers might provide real-time data on skills gaps, creating a continuous loop of learning and adaptation.

AI and predictive analytics play a crucial role in career guidance by providing students with a more accurate roadmap for their future careers and helping them navigate the complexities of an evolving job market.

As the analytics industry continues to grow, its influence on education and career decision-making will continue to expand, empowering students, educators, and industries to shape career paths and educational outcomes more effectively through data-driven insights.

The writer is an AI and analytics leader

Financial and corporate literacy essential skills for students

ROUSHAN CHATTERJEE

Academics have always been considered the most crucial foundation for a child's success and future endeavours. However, the question still arises if it is the only contributing factor to the child's growth or if there is something more. Various studies suggest that extra-curricular activities are equally important for the holistic development of a child. Shraddha Oza, the ECA Coordinator of the Ashok Hall Group of Schools shares insights on why extra-curricular activities are as significant as traditional academics.

"Academics will only let you know about the subject, but how to approach it, how to develop interpersonal skills, organisational skills, leadership, team management; all these come from extra-curricular activities," Oza emphasised. She further gave an example of preparing for a presentation. "If there's no teamwork, no communication skills, how will one put up a presentation? This is where recreational activities come into play."

According to Oza, these skills are not only vital in school but in the professional world as well. Whether one enters the corporate sector or starts their own business, one needs to learn how to delegate work, manage people and think critically - skills that are not solely learned from textbooks.

"When we were in school, we had a mandatory sports period. Playing sports is important as one can learn discipline and sportsmanship," said Oza recalling her school days. "Today's kids don't know how to fail. If they fail, they take it too much to heart. Parents aren't teaching their children to fail." She further highlights the importance of failure. "Failure is the primary step towards growth. If you don't fail and learn to take it positively, you won't be able to move forward."

Oza also focuses on the shift in parenting styles. "As both the parents work today, they are not able to provide the proper time and attention that a child requires. Instead they hand over a gadget to keep them busy." This results in the further isolation of the child and also challenges the parent-child bond.

To address the problem, Oza suggests that at least one parent take a sabbatical for a short period of time, during the child's early years. "It necessarily doesn't have to be the mother," she clarified. "Father can also take the responsibility. The initial years are crucial in developing a child's personality."

Considering the dynamic needs in today's world, Oza introduced new subjects in her school. "Most schools have dance, music, recitation, taekwondo; we added 'Financial Investment' and 'Corporate Communication' with it." Introduced for Class 11 and 12, these subjects aim to provide students with the practical knowledge to deal with real-life scenarios.

"Financial literacy is important, as many students graduate without the basic knowledge of banking and investment," Oza affirmed. According to Oza, financial investment emphasises how to save and invest money, understand stocks, and plan finances. On the other hand, by enriching students with knowledge on corporate communication, students learn how to write personal statements, apply to universities and handle interviews - skills necessary no matter where they study or apply for jobs. The other branches of the school offer subjects like content and blogging, to keep up with shifts in journalism and digital media; and entrepreneurship to teach students how to run business in the digital era.

To ensure that students make the right choice, the school gives the flexibility to explore different subjects before committing. "We allow students to try out the subjects from April to June. Sometimes students take up a subject due to parental or peer pressure, so we give them time to discover what they truly enjoy," she claimed.

Oza shared how these subjects helped their students in a practical setting. "One of our students took part in a renowned school's competition on 'How to be a good manager?' and won the first position." She further added. "Later she wrote a letter thanking her corporate communication teacher. She wrote about how the classes helped her win the competition and gain confidence." In another instance, a student surprised her father by giving investment-related advice that she learned in school. "Her father was shocked and now even asks for stock market tips?" she exclaimed. While academics remain the cornerstone of education, recreational activities help in the all round growth of a child. It fosters skills such as creativity, teamwork and leadership. "Ultimately, education is not only about learning facts, it is also about implementing them," Oza concluded.

Not Just Skilling, But Learning to Learn

India's higher education system is at a pivotal moment. The choices made today will shape the country's intellectual and economic landscape tomorrow. While NEP 2020 is ambitious, the current discourse, often fixated on skilling, risks missing the bigger picture. Education isn't merely about equipping young people with job-ready skills but about fostering adaptability, critical thinking and a deep-rooted ability to learn, a necessity in our rapidly evolving, tech-driven world.

State public universities (SPUs), set up and run by state governments, serve over 80% (32.5 mn) of higher ed students. Historically, their expansion has been instrumental in increasing access to education. SPUs have the reach and student base to become hubs of R&D and innovation. Yet, as a new NITI Aayog report, 'Expanding Quality Higher Education Through SPUs', highlights, they remain underfunded and bureaucratically shackled. Over 40% of faculty positions are vacant. Only 10% of SPUs have well-equipped research facilities.
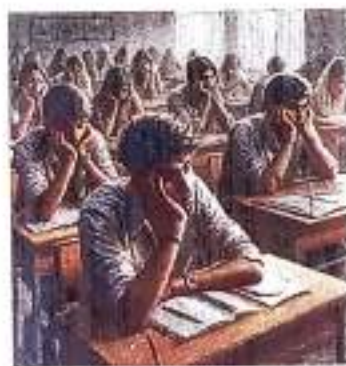
GoI is working on a framework to represent contributions of knowledge-driven sectors. This is commendable. But building a strong roof first requires building a solid ground floor. Instead of nurturing inquiry and innovation, many institutions churn out graduates who struggle to pivot beyond the limited scope of their degrees. If we genuinely seek a Viksit Bharat, both GoI and states must not only increase allocations for higher ed, as NITI rightly recommends, but also make smart and focused investments. Unis can't be degree factories meeting enrolment targets. This is not about abstract ideals but instilling an ever-evolving process suited to the ever-evolving real world. The transition from access to excellence is now an imperative.

No more incrementalism

The scale of India's learning crisis demands bolder action

SRIDHAR RAJAGOPALAN

THE ANNUAL STATUS of Education Report (ASER) 2024 offers a glimmer of hope about India's education landscape. It suggests that the alarming learning losses inflicted by the Covid-19 pandemic are beginning to reverse, particularly in states implementing the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat mission with rigour. However, the report also underscores a sobering reality: Delays in achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) risk leaving millions of children without the basic skills necessary to lead dignified lives. While states are making strides — through material distribution, structured pedagogy, and teacher training — four critical strategies remain underutilised. These steps, though politically challenging, could accelerate progress toward ensuring every child attains FLN by 2030.

Public awareness campaigns have proved transformative in sectors like health (for example, the Pulse Polio drive) and tourism. Yet, education — particularly FLN — lacks a comparable societal mobilisation. A sustained campaign could spotlight the urgency of foundational skills, clarify the roles of parents and communities, and destigmatise systemic shortcomings. For instance, framing questions like "Can every 8-year-old in your neighbourhood read a simple paragraph?" could ignite grassroots accountability.

Economically, the rationale is clear: Studies show that investments in FLN yield returns five to six times higher than later remedial programmes like vocational training. However, governments often avoid such campaigns, fearing that they expose systemic failures. This mindset must shift. Transparent communication about learning gaps, coupled with actionable guidance for parents (for instance, encouraging children to read signboards or newspaper headlines, practising counting), can turn households into allies.

Despite the private sector's potential, collaborations remain ad hoc and mistrustful. For example, most states dismiss ASER findings and seem to trust only government-led assessments like the National Achievement Survey (NAS) by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), or state government studies despite serious concerns over quality and methodological rigour in said studies. This reluctance limits opportunities for innovation.

Effective partnerships could involve education technology firms developing AI tools to assess oral reading fluency in regional languages, grassroot NGOs with expertise scaling remedial programmes, CSR initiatives funding classroom resources or teacher training and even individuals volunteering in a structured way as per an outline shared statewide.

Government officials often argue that the private sector has many "shady players" but that should be seen as a challenge that can be overcome with due diligence. The goal is to position FLN as a national mission where all stakeholders — government, NGOs, corporations, and citizens — contribute.

Assessments are often viewed as punitive rather than diagnostic. States must reframe them as tools to "shine a spotlight" on gaps and guide interventions. For instance, ASER's simple, household-based tests reveal stark disparities: In 2024, only 45 per cent of Grade V students in rural India could read a Grade II-level text. Regular, transparent reporting of such data — paired with contextual analysis — can help teachers tailor instructions and policymakers allocate resources.

Emerging technologies can revolutionise assessments. AI-powered tools now measure oral reading fluency, providing real-time feedback to students. Edtech solutions that have been rigorously tested and assessed gamify and improve learning in mathematics and language and illustrate this potential. However, these innovations require government buy-in. By committing to systematic, tech-enabled assessments, states can transform raw data into actionable insights.

Many states treat low learning outcomes as political liabilities, suppressing unfavourable data. For instance, India's withdrawal from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) after poor rankings in 2009 reflects this defensiveness. Yet, communities are already aware of systemic shortcomings — evident in rising private school enrolments, despite the costs.

The Swachh Bharat campaign's success hinged on acknowledging India's sanitation crisis; similarly, FLN progress demands candour. States like Punjab, which publicly released the dismal NAS 2021 results and launched targeted reforms, show that transparency drives improvement. Celebrating incremental gains — while openly addressing setbacks — can build public trust and sustain momentum.

The NIPUN Bharat initiative, teacher training programmes, and curricular reforms are commendable first steps. However, the scale of India's learning crisis demands bolder action. A nationwide FLN campaign, robust private partnerships, data-driven assessments, and unflinching transparency could bridge the gap between intent and impact.

With 2030 — the deadline for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals — approaching, India cannot afford incrementalism. As ASER 2024 reminds us, every year of delay represents a generation denied the right to foundational skills. The path forward is clear: it is time for states to walk it with courage.

The writer is co-founder of the Bengaluru-based Educational Initiatives

The idea of a university

Understanding its mission as producing knowledge-makers will provide much-needed clarity for UGC's initiatives

C R Sasikumar

N S GUNDUR

WE HAVE COME a long way since establishing the first three universities in India — in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras — in 1857. Despite the significant role institutions of higher learning, especially universities, have played in shaping intellectual and social life in India, there is an appalling lack of reflective discussion on the idea of university education in our policies and practices.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), which was set up in 1953 and became a statutory body in 1956 to regulate Indian higher education, is time and again at the centre of public debate due to its policy decisions. The inconsistency of its stances on issues such as M.Phil, PhD, and CARE-list journals often invites criticism. Yet, in these debates, both the policies and the ensuing critiques often miss a crucial element — reflection on the very idea of the university and the nature of the learning it should aim to foster. Therefore, it becomes essential to ask: What kind of institution is a university? From where and how has it come to us?

Though India boasts of ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshashila, our understanding of what kind of institutions they were — their disciplinary matrix and their pedagogical methods — is too limited to reconstruct their models. Our contemporary universities, for good or bad, have travelled far by inheriting the structures of the Western model. Therefore, understanding the intellectual history of universities in the West is a crucial step for developing policies and practices that can shape the future of universities in India.

The university, one of the oldest institutions, next only to the army and Church, has played an important role in shaping Western culture and civilisation. This role, however, is not without its crises. From Immanuel Kant to Jacques Derrida, philosophers have long debated the challenges faced by universities. As Shashikala Srinivasan, in her book *Liberal Education and its Discontents* (2018), identifies, the debate on university problems in the West has often been articulated in terms of the idea of education, the nature of knowledge and learning that it involves. To make sense of contemporary challenges, it is helpful to delve into the historical development of the institution.

Medieval Europe birthed the institution of the *universitas*, which, in Latin, means whole, the universe, or the world. In Roman law, it implies persons associated with guilds, societies, corporations or bodies. It was a guild formed for the pursuit of learning by monks and was rooted in theological studies. Later, it became a place for instructing children of the ruling class, building them into gentlemen. Despite the transformation of the university from its theological roots into a secular institution, the pursuit of learning and the cultivation of the self remained central to the idea of the universitas.

The pre-history of universities in Europe may be traced back to the Greek tradition. The aspirations of the modern idea of the university resonated with Socrates's dialogic method, Plato's Academy, the Aristotelian disciplinary matrix, and goals of inquiry. If, as philosopher Michael Oakeshott emphasises, the university should be a place where many voices join in the conversation, Socrates, whose pedagogy engaged others in dialogue, and his dictum "an unexamined life is not worth living" should guide the university culture, not to mention Plato's dialogues and cave allegory. Aristotle's model of rational enquiry, his convictions in metaphysics about scholars' desire to know the world for its own sake and other intellectual virtues exemplified in his works should continue to inspire contemporary university practices. Therefore, one can see Western scholarship often revisiting the Greek tradition.

The ideal of university education, articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, a 19th-century Prussian educationist and reformer, inspired the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1809-10, a modern university, that became a global reference point. This idea of a university, which went hand in hand with the formation of nation-states in Europe, was conceived against vocational education, the polytechnics of the Napoleanic period. For Germans, nation-building involved the noble idea of *Bildung*: cultivating the self of the citizens through liberal-arts education. Within this grand idea, voices like Martin Heidegger later thought about the university as serving knowledge to the state.

The university was conceived as a research institution, but the activity of research was not understood as a means to an end — for example, producing patents — but for *Bildung*. It was presumed that along with material institutions like hospitals and revenue departments, reflective and scholarly institutions like universities were also a necessary condition for leading a "good life". While the Humboldt model focused on the freedom to teach, learn and research, John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* in Britain conceived the university as a place for imparting universal knowledge resulting in broader liberal education; it argued that knowledge can be its own end.

Over the last 800 years, the concept and practice of university education have undergone a sea change, resulting in a vast body of knowledge about its past and future. Therefore, I am not proposing the idea of going back to the classical notion of the university. Instead, I roughly suggest, as Sheldon Pollock elsewhere has, that knowing how people acted and made choices in the past will help us make informed choices in the present.

Though we use terms such as liberal-arts education, conference, seminar and research to refer to knowledge production in contemporary times, we have yet to make sense of them as historically handed-down legacies with loaded content; simply reproducing them as blanket terms will not help us. Without historical understanding, these practices appear as mimicries.

In an age where artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the knowledge economy, the notion of *Bildung* becomes even more urgent. AI tools like ChatGPT, for example, can produce better write-ups, but they cannot cultivate the self. Additionally, if we understand the university as a space for different voices conversing, our interdisciplinary centres, irrespective of sciences and humanities, will truly begin to converse with each other.

Likewise, understanding the university's mission as producing knowledge-makers, those who seek knowledge for its own sake, will provide much-needed clarity for UGC's initiatives to train teachers as scholars and scientists.

Holding on to the idea of the university sketched above is wise but it is wiser to look for alternative modes of learning and inquiry both in the West and elsewhere for building universities in the 21st century.

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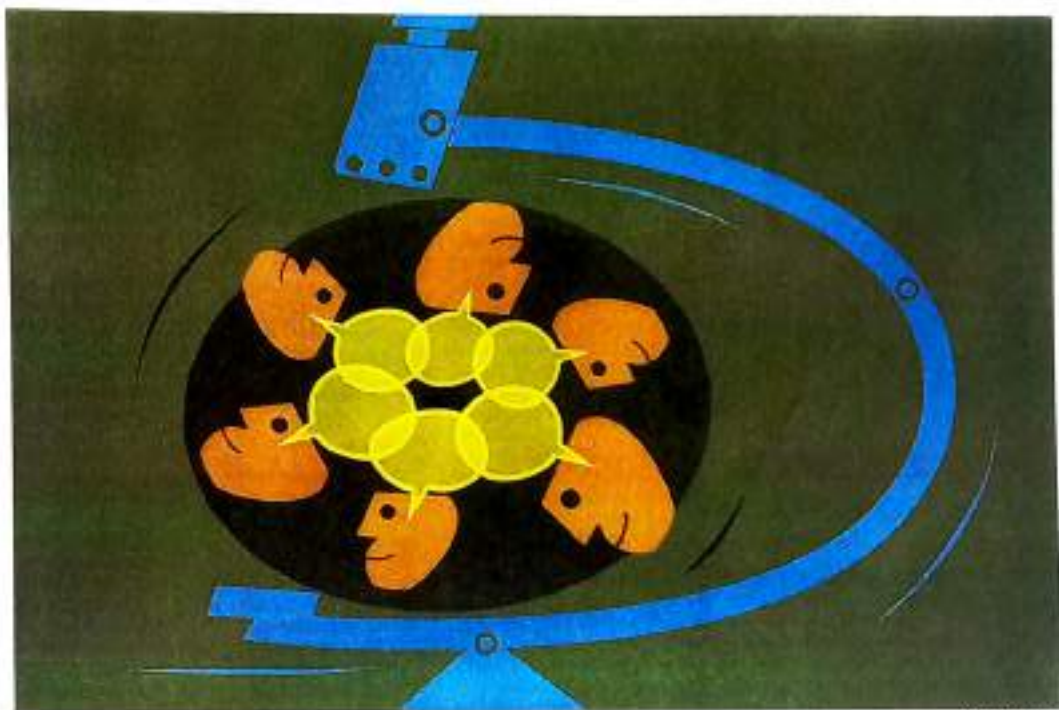
> Let's chat in Aadi Vani!

AI Set to Give Voice to Endangered Aadi Vaani

App to bridge linguistic gap between English & Hindi and tribal languages

Nidhi Sharma

New Delhi: In a bid to save endangered tribal languages and promote learning in mother tongue, the Centre is all set to launch Aadi Vaani — an AI-driven downloadable app for tribal languages. The app, designed to bridge the linguistic gap between English and Hindi and tribal languages, will have the facility of translation, a bilingual dictionary and important awareness material on problems like sickle cell anaemia.

The primary objective of the app is to make learning easier and make English and Hindi books accessible to tribal students in their own language. A beginning will be made in four tribal languages — Bhili, Mundari, Santhali and Gondi. This will be extended to include all tribal languages gradually.

A senior tribal affairs ministry official, who did not wish to be identified, told ET, "This will help in achieving the primary objective of the National Education Policy — learning and teaching in the mother tongue. NCERT books are available free online chapter by chapter. Any teacher or tribal student can get these chapters and then upload the file on the app to get translation in their tribal language."

The app will also have a text to speech facility, meaning that any text in English and Hindi will be translated into the available tribal language in audio format. This will help a person who cannot read the tribal language text in understanding any text in English or Hindi. "Initially, this text to speech facility will be available in Santhali alone. Gradually, it will be extended to other languages," said the official.

LANGUAGE expertise has been provided by Tribal Research Institutes

As per 1971 Census, any language spoken by less than 10,000 persons is considered endangered. A beta version of the app may be launched by President Draupadi Murmu on Sunday. The ministry has partnered with IIT Delhi, IIIT Hyderabad, IIIT Naya Raipur and BITS Pilani for technological know-how. The language expertise has been provided by Tribal Research Institutes.

A senior official, involved in the project, told ET, "The app has been developed by students of these premier institutes within six months. This is ground-breaking as companies like Google are taking 5-6 years to develop such translation apps."

The app will have Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Mann Ki Baat speeches in the four tribal languages as well. The app will also have a feedback loop. In case of errors in translation which a user wants to point out, these can be done and the AI-integrated correction tool will pick these up and correct for next usage.

We owe this to the youth

Checking graft in the education ecosystem requires a combination of technology and value instruction

S S MANTHA

IT IS PAINFUL to hear that a vice-chancellor, officials of the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC), professors of prestigious institutions and office-bearers of an apparently "high-ranking" university were arrested recently for bribes allegedly given and taken in exchange for better rankings. It is doubly painful to see the system descending to the corruption that was once eliminated.

Transparency and accountability were brought into the accreditation system almost 13 years ago. Complete digitisation of every process that began with the receiving of applications, processing them and uploading deficiencies to generating the final approval letters was a path-breaking transformation that brought about great institutional credibility. All interaction with the management of the institutes was either curbed completely or kept to a minimum. All expert visits were replaced with online updating of data, with offline visits limited to the addressing of complaints.

Regulators have, by the nature of their work, opportunities for corruption. Someone breaks the rule and someone is expected to bring them to book. This is either done or not done for a price. The cycle is difficult to break when the stakes get higher. That said, is corruption an economic phenomenon which is judged on ethical grounds? AICTE, before the reforms, was often seen as steeped in systemic corruption that included conflicting incentives, discretionary and monopolistic powers, lack of transparency, and a culture of impunity. These stemmed from weaknesses in due processes, which some institutions exploited. New processes were developed with checks and balances and these were hardcoded into an e-governance system. The AICTE had a large contingent of employees who were on deputation, while the rest were entrenched in the old ways. This combination erased institutional memory on the one hand and encouraged impunity on the other. At AICTE, everyone on deputation was replaced and the permanent staff transferred. These decisions came at a price, with threats

both personal and professional. Today, the AICTE and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) enjoy a fair degree of credibility. The system is still not fool proof and securing it against corruption remains a work in progress. However, other regulatory agencies, especially in the education system, could still do well to learn from AICTE's experience.

Is corruption limited only to government establishments? There are any number of private companies that indulge in corruption. This is not a question of your corruption vs my corruption. The issue is a lack of values in the people who run the systems. That said, the government — with transparency and good governance as its supreme tenets — must lead the way to prevent all forms of corruption.

The pressure to succeed today is immense. Technology can be a leveller. But it can only do so much. That's why the reforms initiated more than a decade ago require follow-up today, especially because society places a premium on education like never before. Our education system has done well to produce entrepreneurs, politicians, doctors, engineers, artists and actors. Even then, it is time to re-imagine it by keeping values in focus.

At times, corruption is hidden in our societies. All parties want to keep their transactions secret. For some, it could be doing someone "a friendly turn", for others it could be just minor "misbehaviour". Different people understand corruption differently. Incidents of corruption lead to calls for reform. However, reforms can only result from paradigm shifts.

How to effect this paradigm shift in the education ecosystem? The realisation that corruption is bad and must be dealt with is a good starting point. Second is to understand the political economy of the system. Agencies like NAAC and NBA must realise that the stakes are high for the management running these institutes. They raise the fees based on better rankings and hence, they will do whatever it takes. After all, rankings trans-

late into hundreds of crores each admission year, not to speak of the sale of so-called "management seats".

The NAAC's proposed binary accreditation may be an answer. However, it tends to gloss over the finer aspects of quality and puts everyone at an equal disadvantage. There is also the problem of visiting expert teams who are expected to verify the claims. This is a huge starting point for corruption. Data uploaded to the site instantly, verified through third parties and legacy data, with discrepancies flagged instantly, is an idea worth exploring. DigiLocker, a secure cloud-based platform for the storage, sharing and verification of documents and certificates, provides access to authentic digital documents to the citizen's digital document wallet. Why not make it mandatory for every institute to upload all their documents, both academic and administrative, that can be used as primary sources for verification?

The Mexican economist Angel Gurría, who was OECD secretary-general between 2016 and 2021, framed the problem aptly. "Integrity, transparency and the fight against corruption have to be part of the culture. They have to be taught as fundamental values," he said. By all accounts, individual action has proved insufficient to target systemic corruption. Experts like Gurría have, therefore, emphasised collective action. However, whatever the method, it will be naive to expect that corruption will disappear from society. Our efforts must be to rein it in and protect the vulnerable. Keeping the education system free of controversy is a critical pre-requisite for catering to the needs of an aspirational society. The costs of corruption are paid by the taxpayer. The costs of corruption in the education system are paid by the country's youth.

Corruption may be as old as human history. However, regulatory heads and vice-chancellors ought to lead by example. That could be the precursor to systemic change.

The writer is former chairman, AICTE

'Bill on anvil to set up co-op studies' varsity'

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NEW DELHI: The Union government is on course to set up a university for cooperation studies and a bill towards this purpose will be passed by Parliament soon, Union home and cooperation minister Amit Shah told a parliamentary consultative meeting held on Tuesday.

Addressing the meet, which discussed key programmes of the ministry, Shah said the university will train professionals for the cooperative sector, an official quoted the minister as saying. The bill aims to convert the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA) into a university, to be known as the "Tribhuvan Sahkari University", and declare it as an "institution of national importance".

Cooperatives are collective enterprises owned jointly by their members, who share profits and losses equally.

India's cooperative sector, over a century old, provides livelihood to millions, especially women, in sectors such as dairy, fisheries, finance, housing and agriculture. The cooperative sector's is worth over ₹150 lakh crore, as per the Economic Survey 2022-23.

The minister said the government proposed to set up at least one primary agricultural cooperative society or PACS in every panchayat of the country.

"To realise Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mantra of 'Sahkar Se Samriddhi' (prosperity through cooperatives), the reach of PACS is being ensured in every village," Shah told the meet attended by top officials.

He also said that the Centre was working with the Reserve Bank and the finance ministry to arrive at similar tax structures for both the corporate and cooperative sectors.
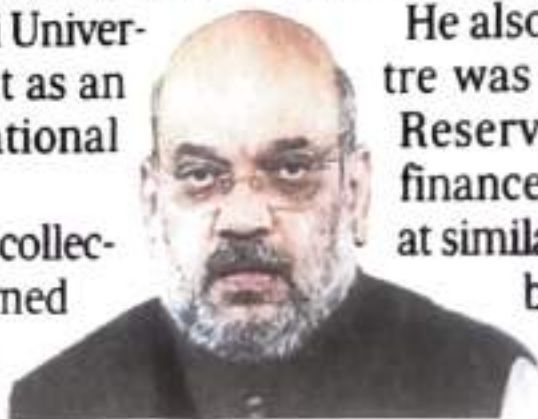
CEO SPEAKS

BRIDGING EDUCATION & JOBS: ARE CERTIFICATES ENOUGH WITHOUT SKILLS?

DR SANKU BOSE

The workplace of 2030 will look dramatically different from today, and employers are already bracing for the shift. According to the Future of Jobs Report 2025 by the World Economic Forum (WEF), 39% of key job skills are expected to change by the end of the decade. This transformation is being driven by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and the evolving demands of the global economy. In this context, the traditional emphasis on degrees is being replaced by a more pragmatic focus on skills, raising an important question: Are skills now more valuable than degrees in today's job market?

In India, multiple reports have sounded the alarm that possessing a degree does not necessarily translate into employability. The India Skills Report 2024 highlighted that only about 50% of graduates are employable, a worrying statistic that exposes disconnect between academia and industry. Similarly, the Annual Employability Survey by Aspiring Minds has consistently shown that a vast majority of Indian engineering graduates lack the skills required for even entry-level jobs in the technology sector. This is not a problem of talent but of misalignment. Our higher education system continues to emphasise theoretical knowledge over practical and industry-relevant skills.

Contrast this with countries like Germany, where skill-based education is given as much, if not more, importance than formal degrees. Germany's dual education system blends classroom learning with hands-on apprenticeships, ensuring that students graduate with both theoretical knowledge and practical expertise. This model has been instrumental in maintaining one of the lowest youth unemployment rates in Europe. Similarly, countries like Switzerland, Finland, and Singapore have integrated vocational training and continuous skill development into their mainstream education systems, making them more responsive to industry needs.

Recognising the severity of the problem, India has begun taking steps to bridge the gap between education and employment. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was a landmark shift in this direction, emphasising skill development, vocational education, and experiential learning. It envisions a system where students are exposed to industry skills early in their academic journey, making them job ready rather than just degree-holders.

The government has also launched several initiatives to address the skills gap. The Skill India Mission and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) are focused on providing vocational training and upskilling opportunities to millions of youth. Similarly, Atal Tinkering Labs in schools encourage students to develop hands-on problem-solving skills from an early age. More recently, the Digital India push has fostered an ecosystem where online learning platforms offer courses in emerging technologies like AI, cloud computing, and data analytics—skills that are in high demand but largely missing from traditional university curricula.

Despite these efforts, societal perception still favour degrees over skills. Many employers in India continue to use college degrees as the primary filter for hiring, even when those degrees do not necessarily indicate competency. There is also reluctance among students and parents to embrace vocational education, largely due to cultural biases that associate skill-based careers with blue-collar work.

For India to truly embrace a skill-first approach, several shifts are needed. First, universities must collaborate more closely with industries to design curricula that align with real-world job requirements. Industry-

> **If India wants to lead in the global economy of tomorrow, it must start by answering a fundamental question today—do we want job seekers or job creators?**

driven micro-credentialing and competency-based education should become mainstream. Second, companies must change their hiring practices, focusing on demonstrated skills rather than just educational qualifications. Encouragingly, many tech companies and startups are already moving in this direction—organisations like Google, IBM, and TCS have started hiring candidates based on certifications and skill assessments rather than degrees alone.

The future of work will belong to those who can learn, unlearn, and relearn. In a world where knowledge becomes obsolete at an unprecedented pace, the ability to continuously upskill is more valuable than a static degree. If India hopes to unlock the full potential of its youth, it must shift its priorities - placing skills at the heart of education and employment. If India wants to lead in the global economy of tomorrow, it must start by answering a fundamental question today—do we want job seekers or job creators? The answer lies in skills, not certificates.

The author is the Group CEO of Techno India Group, a visionary and an educator. Beyond his corporate role, he is also a mentor who guides students towards resilience and self-discovery

IS THE FUTURE OF HIRING ALL ABOUT SKILLS, NOT DEGREES?

Upskilling and reskilling are now key long-term investments to stay competitive in India's changing job market

ANINDITA ACHARYA

Not long ago, having a degree from a top institution with good grades was enough to land you a prime spot in job interviews. But with industries evolving rapidly, especially due to technological advancements, hiring practices are changing too. Today, employers prioritise practical skills that directly meet their needs over just academic credentials. The Future of Jobs Report 2025 predicted that 39% of key job skills will change by 2030. With technology advancing at breakneck speed, continuous learning and upskilling have become essential. The rise of AI and generative AI has only intensified the demand for new skills. That doesn't mean degrees are obsolete—but they're no longer the sole deciding factor. Instead, companies seek a balance between formal education and hands-on skills.

Meanwhile, employers' expectations have also changed. People want flexibility, mobility, and more control over their careers. With intense competition for talent, workers now have more power than ever, according to a report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG). In today's job market, it's clear—skills matter just as much, if not more, than certificates.

"While traditional degrees still provide a worthwhile foundation of knowledge and critical thinking ability, the increasingly accelerating rate of technological change has rendered practical, adaptive abilities increasingly valuable. Employers increasingly value candidates who possess both fundamental knowledge and the ability to acquire new skills quickly, particularly in emerging technologies and digital technologies. This development has given rise to other credentials like professional certifications, micro-credentials, and portfolio evaluations that support specialised skills and real-world expertise. In the future, most successful professionals are likely to be those that combine the full knowledge acquired through traditional schooling with a commitment to ongoing upskilling and adaptation to the industry's needs. The emphasis should, therefore, be on viewing degrees and skills as complementary assets rather than substitutable qualifications, and both will be valuable assets for career development and professional transformation," said Dr MM Ramya, Dean of AM Jain College.

According to Pratham Barot, CEO and Co-founder, Zell Education, as industries evolve, especially with rapid advancements in AI, automation, and digital transformation, the value of skills is increasing over traditional degrees. "While degrees provide foundational knowledge, it is the practical application of specific skills that determine employability and career growth today," he said.

BCG's report also showed that more and more job seekers are finding success without traditional degrees. In the US alone, about 70 million workers are considered "STARs" (Skilled Through Alternative Routes), meaning they've built their careers through experience or self-learning rather than a college education. SHRM reported that 75% of companies are moving in this direction, and over 40% now prioritise skills over degrees when hiring. The reason? Employers want people who can start contributing right away, without needing months of training. Practical skills matter more than ever.

Dhriti Prasanna Mahanta, Vice-President & Business Head, TeamLease Degree Apprenticeship, highlighted a LinkedIn report which said that over 80% of Indian professionals consider skills more critical than academic credentials. "The job market is undergoing a paradigm shift where practical skills often outweigh formal degrees. Employers prioritise candidates with in-demand technical and problem-solving abilities, reducing the onboarding learning curve. Apprenticeships and work-based learning programmes provide real-world experience, making professionals job-ready from day one. Government-backed initiatives like NASSCOM FutureSkills and PLI-linked skilling programmes are bridging the skills gap in AI, cloud computing, and cybersecurity. In a rapidly evolving economy, adaptability and continuous skill acquisition are emerging as the key differentiators for career success," he said.

LinkedIn also reported that upskilling is more important than ever, with 87% of professionals stressing the need for continuous learning. Recognising this, the government is also taking steps to equip the workforce. In Budget 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the establishment of five National Centres of Excellence for Skilling to help young people adapt to evolving job demands. Also, a Centre of Excellence in AI for Education will be set up with a ₹500 crore investment, along with a National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Management in Bihar. Clearly, upskilling and reskilling are no longer optional. They are now long-term investments in staying relevant in today's fast-changing job market.

Sachin Alug, CEO, NLB Services admitted that the government's recent budget announcement of five National Centres of Excellence for Skilling and a dedicated AI Centre of Excellence shows a clear focus on future-ready workforce development. "This push for specialised training aligns with industry demands, particularly in emerging technologies, as companies across sectors increasingly prioritise candidates with updated digital skills and adaptable learning capabilities," he said.

Nitish Jain, President & Founder, SP Jain Group, pointed out that it is not a matter of skills vs degrees. Instead, it's about degrees that teach the right skills. "A degree is only valuable if it prepares you for the future. If 39% of job skills are going to change by 2030, then it's clear that employers aren't just hiring for what you know today—they want to see if you can adapt, learn, and lead in a fast-changing world. AI and automation will take over many tasks in the future—data analysis, number crunching, even decision making to some extent. But what machines can't replace are human skills—the ability to think critically and innovatively, lead with empathy, global intelligence, and adaptability. That's what will set professionals apart," he said.

> It's not a matter of skills vs degrees. Instead, it's about degrees that teach the right skills

Breaking barriers: Building a future for women in science

BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Trailblazing women scientists continue to defy the odds, proving that inclusion is not just a matter of fairness but a necessity for scientific and societal progress

In the 21st century, where scientific breakthroughs continue to shape our world, the persistent underrepresentation of women in science remains a glaring issue. Women have been at the forefront of some of the greatest scientific achievements across the globe in diverse fields from basic science to space science. Despite these inspiring role models, systemic barriers continue to stifle women's participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). It's time we confront these challenges and build a future where women can truly thrive in science. What kind of scientific world are we building if we exclude half of our population?

Without the full participation of women, we lose access to a vast pool of talent, creativity, and innovative solutions that could address some of our biggest challenges. Many girls are discouraged from pursuing science from a young age due to stereotypes that frame these fields as "unsuitable" or "too difficult." The so-called "leaky pipeline" begins to take its toll as early as high school, with fewer girls opting for science-related studies and careers.

Even for those who break through these initial hurdles, the challenges persist in higher education and professional life. Women in research face a lack of mentorship, unequal access to funding and systemic biases in hiring and promotions.

The numbers speak for themselves: UNESCO reports that only 35 per cent of STEM students globally are women, and their representation in leadership roles remains even lower. In India, the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) confirms that while the number of women pursuing science has grown, their presence in top research positions and leadership roles is still dismal.

Despite these odds, many Indian women scientists have defied the status quo and achieved remarkable success. Dr Indira Hinduja revolutionised reproductive medicine by developing India's first test-tube baby in 1986 and pioneering the gamete intrafallopian transfer (GIFT) technique. Dr Soumya Swaminathan's leadership as Chief Scientist at the World Health Organization (WHO) played a crucial role in global health policy. Kalpana Kalahasti, a senior scientist at ISRO, was instrumental in India's triumphant Chandrayaan-3 mission and earned a spot in Nature's list of notable figures in 2023. These trailblazers not only pushed the boundaries of scientific knowledge but also broke societal barriers, paving the way for future generations of women in science. Does this make any difference to the society? Society benefits from more inclusive and comprehensive solutions when women are at the forefront of scientific innovation. Areas like maternal health, gender-specific medicine and community health interventions often flourish because of women scientists who understand these challenges first-hand. Inclusion isn't just about fairness—it's about enriching science itself. So, how do we move forward? Building a future for women in science requires collective effort on multiple fronts.

We must dismantle the structural barriers hindering women's advancement, provide mentorship programmes and promote policies that ensure equal hiring, funding, and career progression opportunities. Educational institutions should actively encourage girls to pursue STEM fields, while workplaces must offer flexible work environments that allow women to balance personal and professional responsibilities.

It is time to tear down these barriers and build a future where every young girl who dreams of becoming a scientist can do so without limitations. When women are given equal opportunities to contribute to science, we all stand to gain—from groundbreaking discoveries to a more inclusive and prosperous world.

(The writer is the Dean-Academic Affairs, Garden City University, Bangalore, views are personal)

The MBA dilemma: Why degrees alone no longer guarantee success

DINESH **SOOD**

Once considered a guaranteed gateway to lucrative careers, the MBA is under scrutiny as unemployment rates rise—even among graduates from elite institutions

The job market for MBA graduates has reached a critical juncture, sparking conversations that resonate with a growing number of aspirants and professionals grappling with the changing realities of employment. Once seen as a surefire ticket to high-paying corporate roles, the MBA degree is scrutinised for relevance in an evolving economic landscape. This issue is not confined to India alone; even graduates from elite institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and Wharton feel the squeeze. The Wall Street Journal recently reported that in 2024, 23 per cent of Harvard Business School's MBA graduates were jobless. Other top-tier business schools like Stanford and Wharton have seen similar dips, with unemployment rates hovering around 20 per cent.

The problem is not just limited to the United States. According to the International Labour Organisation's Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024, 13 per cent of the global youth labour force was unemployed in 2023 — a staggering figure representing nearly 65 million people. This unsettling trend makes traditional, generalist MBA degrees less appealing than targeted skill certifications. A recent Forbes report highlighted how some MBA graduates have succeeded by lowering their expectations and opting for less conventional roles. In an era where industries are shifting dynamically, the rigid, cookie-cutter MBA model is struggling to keep pace. The need for a 360-degree reimagination of this degree has never been more pressing.

Degrees Alone Won't Cut It Anymore
One fundamental truth is becoming evident: degrees alone no longer guarantee job or entrepreneurship security. The future belongs to professionals who continuously upskill and adapt to meet the ever-changing demands of the workforce. What used to be a clear, structured career trajectory for MBA graduates—typically leading to consulting, finance, or management roles—is now blurred. The stark reality is that a prestigious qualification, while valuable, no longer provides

WHAT USED TO BE A CLEAR, STRUCTURED CAREER TRAJECTORY FOR MBA GRADUATES— TYPICALLY LEADING TO CONSULTING, FINANCE, OR MANAGEMENT ROLES— IS NOW BLURRED

immunity against unemployment or underemployment. Even more telling is the global shift in job seekers' mindsets. While travelling to Canada, I recently observed an MBA graduate running a salon branded "MBA Barber Shop". This reflects an important reality—many skilled gig jobs are vital for holistic growth, but traditional academic pathways have often dismissed such careers as unworthy. Yet, most developed nations respect one's skills rather than qualifications or family background. We must ask: Why doesn't Indian society do the same?

Skill Respect Over Degree Prestige
The changing job landscape demands a fundamental shift in how we perceive employment, education, and career success. Skill acquisition is about individuals learning new competencies and families being sensitised to alternative career paths. It is about communities understanding the implications of an evolving job market. It is about cities and regions acknowledging and respecting those who possess the skills necessary to sustain a livelihood, irrespective of whether they hold an MBA or a B.Tech degree.

The MBA has been a gateway to professional and financial success for decades. However, the economy's evolution demands a departure from this narrow thinking. In India and many other countries, social conditioning has led to an unspoken hierarchy of professions. White-collar corporate roles are celebrated, while vocational or blue-collar jobs are often overlooked. This mindset is outdated and damaging in a world where adaptability and skills matter more than mere academic credentials.

A 360-Degree Skills Revolution
What we need now is a complete rethinking of education and skill development. The traditional MBA

must evolve from a broad-spectrum business degree into a dynamic, skills-focused program that integrates emerging industry trends. A 360-degree approach should include everything from finance to marketing and HR. MBA programmes must incorporate niche skills such as data analytics, digital transformation, sustainability management and entrepreneurship in beauty-wellness, the most emerging sector. Instead of theoretical coursework, there should be a stronger focus on apprenticeships, live projects and problem-solving in real-world business scenarios.

Understanding AI, automation, and emerging technologies should be a core part of the curriculum to prepare graduates for future-ready roles. Rather than treating entrepreneurship as an alternative, business schools should actively promote and equip students with the skills to start and sustain their ventures. Business schools must recognise the gig economy's rise and train students to navigate freelance and contract-based work models.

Beyond Livelihood—Dignity in Work
Redefining career success means placing equal value on all forms of work. Whether a person is an MBA graduate managing a corporate division, an AI consultant, a skilled tradesperson, or a self-employed barber, their ability to contribute meaningfully to society matters. The prestige of a job should be measured not by its title but by its impact and sustainability.

Parents, educators, and policymakers have a role in fostering this change. We must instil in young minds that success is not confined to traditional white-collar professions. Regardless of their chosen field, a skilled individual should be celebrated just as much as a corporate executive. If an MBA graduate decides to become an artisan,

a chef, a salon owner or a renewable energy technician, they should be seen as pioneers, not failures.

The Need for Institutional Change
Educational institutions must move beyond outdated frameworks and align themselves with industry demands. Business schools should foster adaptive thinking, preparing students for unconventional but lucrative career paths. The focus should be on problem-solving, digital proficiency, and entrepreneurial agility rather than rigid academic theories.

Governments and industries should also contribute by incentivising skill-based education. Scholarships, subsidies, and awareness campaigns can help shift societal perspectives on what constitutes a respectable and rewarding career.

Conclusion. A Future Built on Skills Once a golden ticket to corporate success, the MBA faces an existential crisis. If it is to remain relevant, it must undergo radical transformation. A degree is no longer a guarantee; what truly matters is an individual's ability to adapt, innovate, and deliver value in an ever-changing world.

As a society, we need to support and encourage young professionals in their quest to discover their true potential—even in jobs that were once considered "odd." In reality, no job is odd, what matters is its necessity and impact. By embracing a 360-degree perspective on skills and careers, we can build a more inclusive, resilient, and future-ready workforce. The time for change is now.

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The problematic globalisation of medical education

Strange things are going on worldwide in the area of medical education. On the one hand, there appears to be a shortage of medical doctors, while at the same time governments, and in many cases also medical doctors themselves, oppose increased access to the study of medicine. As a result, there has been an increase in international mobility of medical students from high-, mid- and low-income countries. While once medical education was international, now it is nationally regulated, but at the same time becoming internationalised. Because of national and global health needs, it is worth examining this particular global medical environment.

No one knows how many international students are studying in medical schools outside their home countries, but a conservative estimate might put the number to be more than 2,00,000 – many of them in institutions and countries with questionable quality of medical preparation. To give an indication, Ukraine, before the Russian invasion, had 24,000 medical students from abroad, mainly, but not exclusively, from India.

The India crisis

India is an interesting example. The country has a severe shortage of doctors. The demand for places in medical colleges is considerable and, as a result, competition for places is intense. Annually, approximately 2.3 million students sit for the national medical school entry examination, but only one in around 22 successful candidates is able to enter the country's 700-plus medical colleges.

The fierce competition for medical seats in India has compelled many students to explore opportunities abroad. It is estimated that more than 20,000 Indian medical students go abroad to study. With limited government medical seats and high tuition fees in private institutions, studying medicine abroad has emerged as an "affordable" and practical alternative for Indian aspirants. Countries such as Russia, pre-war Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Philippines, China, Mauritius, and Nepal have become attractive destinations.

Interestingly, some of the institutions in foreign

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The phenomenon of foreign medical education is widespread, almost completely unknown, and unregulated

countries are controlled by Indians. One such institution is the Manipal College of Medical Sciences in neighbouring Nepal, the country's first private medical college which was established in 1994. It is operated by the Manipal Education and Medical Group (MEMG), Bengaluru. The American University of Antigua (AUA) College of Medicine, a Caribbean medical school, is also a division of Manipal. This reflects a broader strategy of Indian education groups expanding their footprint overseas to meet the growing demand from Indian students.

However, studying medicine abroad comes with its own challenges, particularly for those who wish to practise in India. Indian students who complete their programmes from foreign institutions must clear the national licensing examination to qualify for medical practice in India. They are also required to complete a medical internship upon their return. Similarly, Indians wishing to practise medicine in other countries must satisfy licensing and other requirements of those countries – and one can find Indian doctors throughout the world. This illustrates that governments are aware of the varying standards of medical education around the world.

In a significant announcement during the Union Budget speech in February 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman highlighted the government's achievements in medical education. She stated that the government had successfully added nearly 1.1 lakh undergraduate and postgraduate medical education seats over the past decade, an increase of 130%. She also revealed plans for further expansion in the medical education sector by announcing that an additional 10,000 seats would be introduced in medical colleges and hospitals in 2026. This initiative is part of a broader five-year goal to add 75,000 new seats, aimed at addressing the growing demand for qualified medical professionals.

Not just a Global South phenomenon

The case of medical education in India illustrates the problematic phenomenon of students leaving the Global South, in particular South Asia and Africa, to study medicine in other mid-income countries – and often to remain abroad. But the trend is broader.

For many years, students from western countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway, have been going to neighbouring countries for their medical studies, due to a lack of access at home. Romania, where medical study is provided in French, Hungary, and Poland are common host countries. Hungary and Poland also receive medical students from the United States. Thousands of U.S. students study medicine in these two countries, as well as in Ireland, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom.

Medical programmes in central and eastern Europe, as well as in Central Asia, cater to diaspora students and teach in English. The Medical University of Warsaw, for instance, has medical study programmes in both Polish and English. Currently, due to a lack of national funding for places at their home universities, about 3,000 Norwegian medical students receive scholarships to study abroad, mainly in central and eastern Europe.

In other words, the phenomenon of foreign medical education is widespread, almost completely unknown, and unregulated. Where entire medical schools are devoted to international enrolments, they are almost exclusively for-profit institutions. Medical schools established in non-English speaking environments, such as Poland and Ukraine, offer English-medium medical curricula to attract high-fee-paying international students.

Balancing demand and quality concerns

As the recent Budget speech shows, the government is starting to see the problem, but solutions are expensive and meet opposition from inside the medical establishment, which fears a deterioration of their privileges and elite status. Yet, with an aging population, the need for quality medical doctors will only increase. The growing number of students looking for medical education abroad illustrates a potential, but there is an overall lack of quality control. More attention is needed on this key challenge.

परीक्षाओं में धांधलियों के चलते विवादों में रही NTA इस बार भी गड़बड़ियां नहीं रोक पाई

NTA की ग़लतियों की सज़ा छात्रों को क्यों

प्रभात गौड़

देश की सबसे प्रतिष्ठित परीक्षाओं में से एक JEE Main के सेशन 1 में आए 12 गलत प्रश्न, कई आउट ऑफ सिलेबस सवाल, अनुवाद की गलतियां और ऐसी तमाम गड़बड़ियों को सुधरने के गलत और अन्यावहारिक तरीकों ने एग्जाम कराने वाली एजेंसी NTA को फिर से विवादों में ला खड़ा किया है।

सारे रेकॉर्ड टूटे। 2021 से लेकर अब तक के आंकड़े बताते हैं कि लगभग हर साल JEE Main में गलत सवाल आते रहे हैं लेकिन इस बार हुई परीक्षा ने पिछले सारे रेकॉर्ड तोड़ दिए। इस बार छात्रों का सामना 12 गलत सवालों से हुआ। ऐसे सवालों को NTA ड्रॉप्ड सवाल कहते हैं और इसके लिए उसकी एक व्यवस्था है, जिसके तहत कुछ केसेस में सभी छात्रों को तो कुछ में उन छात्रों को पूरे नंबर दे दिए जाते हैं जिन्होंने उसे अटेंप्ट किया।

NTA की गलती। लेकिन ऐसे निर्णयों से उन बच्चों के साथ अन्याय होने की आशंका पूरी तरह खत्म नहीं होती, जिन्होंने ऐसे गलत सवालों पर अपने कीमती दस से बारह मिनट लगाए और उसमें उलझ गए। इस बात की संभावना बनी रह सकती है कि गलत सवाल को अटेंप्ट करने वाला एक औसत बच्चा चार नंबर लेकर उस काबिल बच्चे के बराबर आ जाए व आगे ही जाए जिसने उस गलत सवाल को सुलझाकर छोड़ दिया होगा। जिस एग्जाम में एक-एक नंबर से परसेंटाइल में बहुत बड़ा फर्क आ जाता हो, उसमें ऐसे गलत सवालों की कोई जगह नहीं होनी चाहिए। NTA उन्हें मानवीय या तकनीकी भूल कहकर पल्ला नहीं झाड़ सकता।

सिलेबस से बाहर। पिछले साल तमाम विवादों में रहे NTA ने इस साल बार-बार भरोसा दिलाया था कि एग्जाम साफ सुथरा होगा लेकिन सवाल फिर भी उठ रहे हैं। Carnot Cycle और न्यूटन्स लॉ ऑफ कूलिंग ऐसे टॉपिक हैं जिन्हें JEE Main के सिलेबस से बाहर किया जा चुका है। फिर भी इन टॉपिक से सवाल पूछे गए। मानो इतना काफी न था। कुछ एक्सपर्ट्स का कहना है कि पेपर में अनुवाद तक की गलतियां नजर आईं।

डमी स्कूलों की व्यवस्था। CBSE और अदालतें दोनों को इस बात से परेशानी है कि JEE की तैयारी करने वाले बच्चे डमी स्कूल का सहारा लेते हैं। वे स्कूल नहीं जाते और उससे बचे हुए समय को कोचिंग और सेल्फ स्टडी में लगाते हैं। पिछले दिनों देश में ऐसे कई डमी स्कूलों के खिलाफ CBSE ने बाकायदा अभियान चलाया और नोटिस जारी किए। ये ठीक है कि डमी स्कूल की

JEE Main में गड़बड़ियां
- बोनस नंबर पर उठ रहे सवाल
- अनुवाद करी भी गलतियां रहीं
- सिलेबस से बाहर के टॉपिक

व्यवस्था बंद होनी चाहिए। लेकिन क्या सिर्फ स्कूल से बारहवीं की पढ़ाई करके और NCERT के सिलेबस को पढ़कर कोई स्टूडेंट्स JEE Main निकाल लेगा? शायद नहीं। सब जानते हैं कि JEE में ऐसे कई टॉपिक्स से सवाल पूछे जाते हैं जो NCERT के सिलेबस में हैं ही नहीं। डमी स्कूल और कोचिंग को हतोत्साहित करने के साथ क्या ये स्ट्रैटेजी नहीं अपनाई जानी चाहिए कि JEE का सिलेबस NCERT के अनुरूप हो।

विवादों का साया। ये पहला मौका नहीं है जब NTA की विश्वसनीयता दांव पर है। पिछले साल सबने देखा कि किस तरह NEET-UG को लेकर NTA का ढुलमुल रवैया सामने आया था। पेपर लीक की आंच में न जाने कितने काबिल बच्चों का नुकसान हुआ और छात्रों को सड़कों पर उतरकर प्रदर्शन करना पड़ा। NTA द्वारा कराई जाने वाली एक और परीक्षा UGC-NET भी विवाद के साथ में रही। ऐसे तमाम खामियों की जिम्मेदार एजेंसी को इसका क्या खामियाजा भुगतना पड़ा? सिर्फ यही कि उसके चेयरमैन को बदल दिया गया।

साख पर बट्टा। लगातार हो रही ऐसे गड़बड़ी, अव्यवस्था और विश्वसनीयता की कमी ने NTA की साख पर बड़ा धब्बा लगाया है। ऐसे में पूरे एंट्रेंस एग्जाम सिस्टम में व्यापक बदलाव की जरूरत है। कम से कम दूसरे देशों में होने वाले फूलप्रूफ एंट्रेंस एग्जाम सिस्टम का बारीकी से अध्ययन कर NTA के काम करने के तरीके में तो सुधार किया ही जा सकता है। इसके लिए अगर कुछ ढुलमुल और नाकाबिल अफसरों की बलि लेनी पड़े, तो उससे भी सरकार को पीछे नहीं हटना चाहिए।

एक गलती, पांच नंबर। अगर एक बच्चा एक सवाल गलत कर दे तो उसे चार नंबर से तो हाथ धोना ही पड़ता है, उसका एक अंक नेगेटिव मार्किंग के रूप में और कट लिया जाता है यानी एक गलती उसे पांच नंबर से पीछे कर देती है। NTA ने तो 12 गलतियों की हैं, हिसाब लगाएं, उसके कितने नंबर काटे जाने चाहिए। क्यों नहीं उसके कर्ताधर्ताओं से कहा जाना चाहिए कि आप तो मेरिट से पूरी तरह ही बाहर हो गए। आपका परसेंटाइल तो बहुत नीचे चला गया। इसके लिए जिम्मेदार लोगों के खिलाफ एक्शन और पूरे एग्जाम सिस्टम में सुधार वक्त की मांग है। आखिर देश की इतनी बड़ी टेस्टिंग की साख बचानी जो जरूरी है जिससे लाखों छात्रों का भरोसा उसमें कायम रहे।

COMMONPLACE INSTITUTIONS OFTEN DO BETTER VALUE ADDITION THAN THE ELITE

OPINION

FURQAN QAMAR

The excellence of higher education institutions, both in India and internationally, is invariably determined by their reputation and prestige within society; the placement and progression of their students, and the research contribution of their researchers and faculty members, which manifest in publications, patents, and the monetisation of intellectual property rights (IPRs).

Above all, their capacity to attract, retain, and nurture talented faculty and the brightest students, as reflected by a high selectivity rate measured by the seat-to-application ratio, plays a pivotal role in shaping the perception of quality and excellence.

Such indicators of excellence bring exclusivity to higher education institutions, making them suffer from signalling and elitism biases. Such institutions seek to exclusively serve the social and economic elites by resorting to many means.

They restrict the entry of the masses by creating affordability barriers, such as levying superlatively high fees and user charges or devising selection criteria that tend to exclude the commoners, who constitute a dominant section of society.

Such institutions tend to exclude individuals through legacy admissions, favouring students from superior schools with elite upbringing, language fluency, social endowment, and networks.

Favouring faculty with foreign qualifications or hiring leadership, governance, and management teams with urban and elitist biases further perpetuates exclusion. Moreover, allowing pupils with the potential to succeed and excel in life into their portals further enhances their perception of excellence.

Assessing excellence using metrics such as these may not present much of a challenge in advanced countries, where income distribution is nearly equal and which possesses egalitarian attributes. The majority can afford and access excellence, with only a minuscule number being more equal than the rest.

Extending the idea to a developing economy with substantial income inequality presents a challenge. It may lead to heightened income inequality, increased concentration of wealth, and considerable restrictions on access to opportunities.

Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), the National Institutes of Technology (NITs), the Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs), the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs), the Institutions of Eminence (IoE), and the central universities (CUs), the usual claimants of excellence, for example, gobble up ... percent of the central government funds for higher education, serve no more than ... percent of the higher education students population and employ only ... percent of teachers in higher education.

In stark contrast, close to ... percent of students in higher education are served by a multitude of small, underfunded, disadvantaged, and resource-poor higher education institutions. They are often mocked for mimicking higher education and good-for-nothing institutions.

They encompass the majority of publicly funded state universities, private universities, most deemed universities, higher education colleges, and independent institutions of various types.

The public-funded ones are reeling under resource constraints. They are barely able to maintain their existing infrastructure and are rarely in a position to create new ones. Known for their hand-to-mouth existence, they scrimp monthly to pay their pension and salary liabilities.

They survive on self-financed programmes, sections and seats, for which they charge paltry fees from their students compared to elite institutions. They may, for instance, charge no more than five percent for their postgraduate management programme compared to any of the IIMs.

With their limited resources, they can hardly create and maintain a decent infrastructure. They also can't afford the prevailing market salaries for highly qualified faculty and are barred from creating regular faculty positions for their self-financed programmes.

For various reasons, they cannot even fill the existing faculty positions. As a result, nearly sixty percent of teaching in those institutions is done by guest, part-time and visiting faculty.

Except for a few, the country's typical private universities are in a precarious situation. They receive no financial support from funding agencies and must survive on revenue generated internally, mostly from student fees. Few have any endowment or societal contribution to supplement their efforts.

Most are hard-pressed to make their ends meet. They can't charge high fees and must fill all their sanctioned seats and more to break even. With limited resources, they can hire only as many faculty members as are mandatory by the regulatory bodies and are often able to pay only the bare minimum prescribed salaries.

Despite these limitations, non-elite institutions offer higher education opportunities to individuals from the middle and lower tiers of society. They may struggle to attract top faculty and the most talented students. Nevertheless, they dedicate their energy, time, and resources to support those students throughout their studies.

They may not be exemplary in the elitist sense of the term, but they do play a vital role in nation building.

They transform their raw materials using somewhat antiquated tools through simple processes and are able to produce a product that is polished enough to meet an essential societal need.

When assessing the value added by higher education institutions in the lives of their students, it is likely that non-elite institutions contribute the most. They do real value addition by bettering their academic records over their past performance and making them ready for jobs that may not be the best by the market but at least the average.

In any case, their value addition can be best appreciated because they care for the lower middle class, if not the poor and marginalised. They could have otherwise remained only school graduates. After all, in a country where some sixty-five percent of the population has to be provided free food grains to help them survive, not many can afford elite higher education.

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How to Stop Brain Drain 2.0 Pain

**Surya H K &
Sandeep Sen**

The Indian diaspora is often referred to as the 'model immigrant' due to several distinguishing factors in countries where they settle — high educational qualifications, economic success, possessing an entrepreneurial spirit.... Yet, beneath the veneer of this success lies a burgeoning crisis of unfulfilled dreams, perilous livelihoods and talent haemorrhaging at multiple levels.

As job markets tighten globally, a significant number of Indians abroad find themselves underemployed, unemployed or stuck in exploitative conditions, contributing to a complex, multi-tiered 'brain drain' that depletes both India's intellectual capital and capacity for economic growth. So, is the allure of greener pastures overshadowing harsh realities faced by our global workforce?

Amid unstable geopolitics, economic distress and rising populism, countries are shutting doors to foreign workers. Many Indian students abroad are in limbo. Around 13 lakh Indians study abroad, often with loans starting at ₹1 cr. If

they land well-paying jobs, repayment isn't an issue. But with opportunities shrinking in the US, Europe and Canada, many risk defaulting without stable employment.

Three layers of brain drain have emerged:

❶ Our loss, their gain
When Indian students study abroad, train in foreign institutions and join overseas workforces, benefiting other economies over India's.

❷ Badly matched When top-trained Indians take mismatched roles, especially in big tech, wasting talent and hurting the global economy. For instance, big tech companies and tech startups in California are top recruiters of the top STEM programmes of the region. But they often staff organisation with mismatched roles and candidates.

❸ Low returns When individuals return to India, but are forced to exit their fields of expertise and adopt generalist roles owing to lack of opportunities, abandoning their specialised training and passions. For example, graduates who followed their inherent topical interests, but are all employed in generalist roles, preparing slide decks for clients in unrelated fields and sectors.

One could argue that job switching
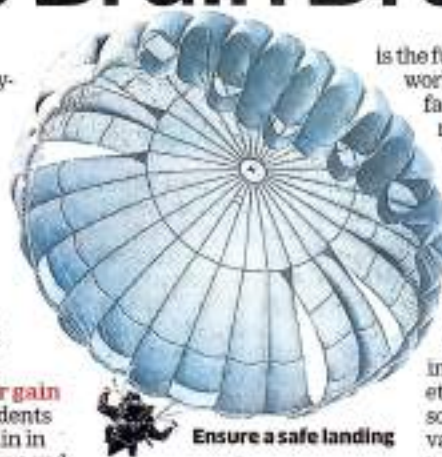
Ensure a safe landing

is the future of work. But the fact is that returnees face hardships while looking for roles that align with their skills and expectations, as their work interests and ethics were solidified in vastly different economies, communities and cultures.

As a result, they often switch to unrelated fields and take time to adapt. India's comparative lack of research-based or innovation-driven opportunities exacerbates this issue. Unlike Western economies, India's spend on R&D is 0.64% of GDP. Its startup economy is largely restricted to tech-first ideas. These may be lucrative for software engineers and MBA graduates, but offers little diversity to job seekers who are trained in psychology, filmmaking or, say, environmental economics.

Returnees often need additional training to adapt to India's systems. Yet, the country lacks programmes to facilitate this transition. Moreover, economic barriers, such as mismatch between salary expectations and available opportunities, deter many from finding satisfying roles.

India's higher education system is

ill-equipped to handle the scale of this crisis. With over 13 lakh students pursuing higher education abroad annually even if a fraction of this cohort chose to study in India, the already overburdened system lacks the capacity to provide quality opportunities. Consider the CAT exam, which attracts around 3 lakh applicants annually for MBA programmes, a small fraction of the total number of graduates in India.

India's higher ed system and employment landscape need urgent reform to prevent this multi-layered brain drain from escalating. Building robust institutions, fostering innovation and aligning education with market needs are long-term solutions. Immediate steps — such as creating reintegration programmes for returnees, enhancing career opportunities in STEM, liberal arts and management fields, and regulating student loan malpractices — are crucial.

India's policymakers must recognise the severity of this crisis. Without systemic changes, the country risks not only losing its best talent but also faces an economic challenge fuelled by disguised unemployment, underemployment, bad loans and wasted potential. The time to act is now, before this multi-tiered brain drain becomes an irreversible drain on India's future.

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ET|15|6

Stop Hindi Imposition

DIPANKAR DEY

Vanishing VOICES

The rise of Hindutva and its promotion of Hindi as India's dominant language, rooted in British-era linguistics, has fuelled political tensions and endangered North Indian regional languages and scripts post-independence

Hindi was scripted in the early 19th century by the East India company in the Fort William college in Calcutta, with William Carey (right) and John B Gilchrist (left) being the main architects

Linguistic diversity and importance

Mother language movement in Bangladesh

The creation of Hindi language in the Fort William College

Mother language movements in India

Observations

> The idea to celebrate International Mother Language Day on February 21 was the initiative of Bangladesh which got independence from Pakistan in 1971

Why NAAC accreditation system needs a rethink

BY INVITATION

V RAMGOPAL RAO

The recent arrests of key figures within the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for alleged bribery and misconduct have sent shockwaves through the higher education sector. This crisis is deeply concerning, not just for the institutions involved, but for the credibility of the accreditation process, which is meant to be rigorous and impartial.

The evaluation of an institution's quality based on academic standards, faculty strength, research output, and infrastructure is tied to funding and regulatory approvals. Institutions with high ratings qualify for greater autonomy and access to govt grants. NAAC also plays a crucial role in shaping how universities and colleges are perceived both nationally and internationally. However, for years, there have been murmurs within academic circles about inconsistencies in its ratings. Some institutions with subpar infrastructure and weak academic credentials received higher grades than well-established universities. The recent arrests only confirm what many have long suspected, eroding trust in accreditation and leaving students, faculty, and policymakers in a difficult position. While India grapples with these challenges, it's worth examining how other countries structure their accreditation processes to minimise corruption and maintain transparency. Here are key reforms India needs to undertake keeping in mind global best practices:

1. Decentralise & diversify: India needs to move beyond NAAC's centralised control and establish multiple independent accrediting agencies, like in the US and Germany. This prevents excessive power concentration and allows institutions to choose accreditors that align with their academic focus. Institutions in the US undergo rigorous self-evaluations before external reviews, fostering accountability and continuous improvement. A peer-review model, involving vetted academicians, ensures ethical assessments resistant to corruption, while accreditation decisions and detailed reports are made public, enhancing transparency. In contrast, NAAC only publishes final ratings without sharing detailed reports. Some of our Institutions of Eminence and top universities should come together to create not-for-profit accrediting bodies with well-defined operating procedures. These agencies should have the same authority as NAAC, fostering competition based on credibility, rigour, and transparency. Ratings should rely on thorough peer reviews by vetted academicians and industry experts, ensuring fair and informed evaluations. This will create a system where institutions are judged on academic merit rather than bureaucratic discretion.

2. Shift focus to outcomes: Accreditation should focus on outcome-based metrics rather than just inputs like infrastructure and faculty numbers. Australia emphasises research impact, graduate employability, innovation, and societal contributions, and India should too. This shift will make accreditation a driver of institutional excellence rather than just another regulatory hurdle. Institutions must also commit to continuous improvement, integrating student feedback and faculty development into the accreditation framework. Instead of rigid grading, a more qualitative, improvement-driven approach, like the UK's, will push institutions to aim for long-term excellence rather than short-term compliance.

3. Strengthen governance and transparency: Strong governance mechanisms are essential to maintain the integrity of accreditation. Strict penalties for malpractice must be enforced, and any agency found violating standards or engaging in corruption should face severe action, including disqualification.

Transparency is non-negotiable. Instead of just publishing ratings, detailed accreditation reports must be publicly accessible, giving students, parents, and stakeholders a real picture of an institution's strengths and weaknesses. A risk-based evaluation model, like Australia's TEQSA, will ensure that regulators focus resources on institutions showing signs of underperformance or misconduct. High-performing universities should be rewarded with greater autonomy and less frequent reviews, reducing unnecessary regulatory burdens while keeping oversight where it's needed most.

In response to the crisis, NAAC has introduced new frameworks, along with online and hybrid evaluations. However, without deeper structural reforms, flaws will persist, driving talent toward foreign institutions. Let's use this moment to create a more transparent and fair accreditation process, one that genuinely upholds the academic excellence we strive for. ■

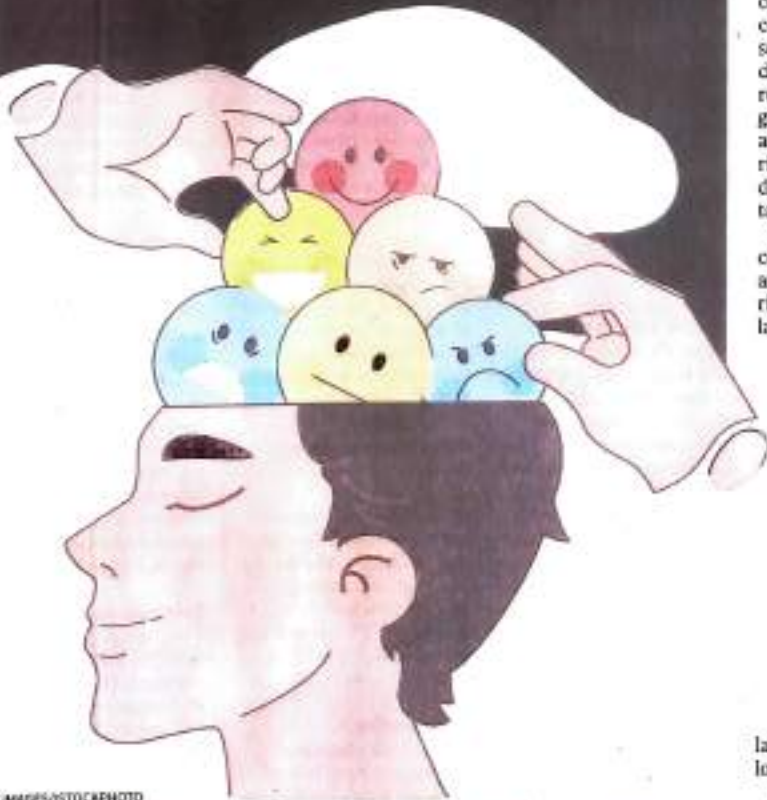*Rao is VC for BITS Pilani group and former director of IIT Delhi. Views are personal*

Geeta Gopinath
Ameen Omar Shareef

Key to a humane world

Socio-emotional learning helps students prepare for a sophisticated future with sensitivity and empathy

The world today has greater connectivity and faster exchange of information. Further, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has created a new paradigm for human existence. However, the focus on greater technical expertise can limit human touch and sensitivity. It can create robotic individuals bereft of human emotions or connections. This makes social-emotional learning (SEL) crucial, as it focuses on developing life skills such as emotional intelligence, empathy, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making and helps students manage stress, develop resilience, and lead balanced lives.

Research has shown that SEL improves social-emotional behaviour and academic performance, and extends the perimeters of education to include the human element in a technologically charged world. It helps manage emotions, develop relationships, set and achieve goals, and make responsible decisions. It involves recognising and respecting each learner's unique attributes and tailoring the teaching according to these attributes.

SEL involves understanding personal strengths and identifies areas of improvement to build confidence and self-efficacy. The next aspect is effective self-regulation of one's emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and actions. This helps manage stress and control one's impulses.

Benefits

Learning is not isolated to the personal level. Students become socially aware and learn to understand and empathise with others and are tuned to recognising and respecting social norms and cultural diversities. They learn to respect other perspectives, give space for others' views and advocate for human rights. SEL teaches students to develop and maintain healthy relationships.

Communication and conflict resolution skills are nurtured through a spirit of cooperation and collaboration and desire to achieve shared goals. The approach enables the person to be a decisive and responsible individual who considers consequences of actions to all and evaluates situations to solve problems effectively. There is holistic integration that balances short- and long-term goals. Educational institutions can integrate the elements of SEL in the curriculum, and extracurricular activities, thus creating a supportive environment for student. This leads to better all-round performance by providing emotional congruence, better communication and teamwork skills and problem-solving abilities. Learners become more engaged in communities and learn to use their strengths for social upliftment.

The most appropriate method to implement SEL in schools is by incorporating its principles into the curriculum of each subject. This could include group activities that foster teamwork and communication or discussions about emotional topics encouraging students to reflect. Educators should implement blended content effectively and efficiently. Further, the support of parents and the community is necessary for successful implementation through PTA.

Community members can create support groups that are involved in the skill-building process.

SEL is the key to retaining humanness in a changing technologically enhanced mechanical environment and improves the student's ability to face technological advances and prepare for a more sophisticated future with sensitivity and empathy.

Geetha Gopinath and Ameen Omar Shareef are Faculty of Economics, National Institute of Technology, Kozhikode.

Education takes a back seat

Despite a 5.16% increase in allocation for higher education, the budget fails to address the sector's pressing needs

FURQAN QAMAR

The Union Budget 2025 has been commended as a "significant step towards an inclusive and empowered India, aligned with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047". Overall, the allocation for higher education was raised by 5.16% over the 2024 budget estimates to Rs 50,077.95 crore.

The budget allocates Rs 20,000 crore to promote research, development and innovation driven by the private sector; it also provides Rs 500 crore for a Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence for Education, aiming to incorporate AI-driven solutions into the educational sector.

Additionally, five National Centres of Excellence for Skilling, in collaboration with global institutions, are proposed to equip youth with skills for the 'Make in India, Make for the World' initiative. To foster technological research in IITs and IISc, 10,000 researchers have been promised improved financial support under the PM Research Fellowship Scheme.

Encouraged by the number of students in 23 IITs, which doubled from 65,000 to 1,35,000 over the past decade, the current budget seeks to enhance facilities in the five new IITs established after 2014, enabling them to accommodate 6,500 additional students.

The allocation for autonomous bodies in higher education has risen by 7.42% to Rs 42,732 crore. Central universities have been assured Rs 16,691 crore, an increase of 4.79% over the previous year.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has received 33.44% more, raising its allocation to Rs 3,335.97 crore. The IITs have received Rs 11,349 crore, an increase of 9.92% compared to the previous budget.

The funding for NITs, Rs 5,687.47 crore, is 12.85% higher than the previous budget. The budget for IIMs, Rs 251.89 crore, reflects an 18.70% increase over the previous budget. IIITs will receive Rs 407 crore, indicating an increase of 28.83%.

Funding for deemed universities has also increased to Rs 604 crore, rising by Rs 8 crore (1.34%). Grants for promoting Indian languages have been raised to Rs 347.03 crore, up by 11.91%.

On the flip side, the allocation for world-class institutions, implemented as the Institutions of Eminence scheme, has been drastically reduced this year to Rs 475.12 crore, compared to the actual expenditure of Rs 1,436 crore in 2023-24.

The allocation for the UGC has increased this year, but only when compared to last year's budget estimate. This year's allocation, at Rs 3,335.97 crore, is merely about 62.65% of its actual expenditure in 2023-24.

Similarly, a significant proportion of the allocation to the centrally funded higher and technical institutions is meant to repay the Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) repayment of principal and interest thereon.

The 5.61% increase in the overall allocation for higher education over the last year is only marginal. Discounted for inflation, the Union government's expenditure on higher education may have, in fact, decelerated over time in real terms. It is all the more disquieting that this year's budget estimate is Rs 5,314.73 crore lower than the actual higher education expenditure in 2023-24.

The size of the Union Budget for 2025 has recorded a compound annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 11.8% over the 2015 budget. In comparison, the growth rate of the budgeted expenditure on education has not surpassed 5.20%.

The allocation for education in budget 2025 is 0.35% of the GDP, compared to 0.55% in 2014-15. In a similar vein, the proportion of the total budget allocated to education has decreased from 4.16% in 2014-15 to a mere 2.25% this year.

Higher education, a component of the education budget, has been allocated considerably less—only 0.098% of the total budgeted expenditure in 2025. The education sector is receiving significantly less funding than it deserves and is also lacking in prioritisation.

Considering the need for expansion and quality enhancement, it may be insufficient to help the government fulfil its stated commitment to cultivate a future-ready workforce and promote world-class research and educational infrastructure.

The 2025 Union Budget is another missed opportunity for the education sector. It may not be quintessential for public funding of education when the nation holds the first quinquennial review of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) in July.

The urgency of enhancing public investment in higher education is not evident in the present budget. A nation, whose 65% of the population is still below 35, must seize every opportunity to reap the demographic dividend. However, this window of opportunity is available to India for a limited time and may be closer than expected.

There is strong evidence that the beginning of the end is near. India's demography is changing rather rapidly. The school-going age group population has already started declining, causing declining demand for elementary and, to some extent, even secondary-level education. In the course of time, senior secondary and higher education may also get afflicted.

There is an imminent danger that India will age before it becomes wealthy. This situation can be avoided only by urgently investing heavily in improving the quality and promoting excellence in higher education. A handful of the best institutions may not be enough, as they serve only a very small section of the population.

At the same time, the nation needs to mitigate the gap between the best and the rest to harness economic, social and strategic benefits. Pressure for global competitiveness further warrants benchmarking the standards of higher education institutions against the best in the world. These can be achieved only by urgently enhancing public investment in education.

(The writer is a former advisor for education in the Planning Commission and is is the chief advisor at Integral University in Lucknow)

Role of universities crucial in creating inclusive AI systems

KARAMJEET SINGH
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THE recent Paris AI Action Summit has highlighted a stark divide among nations regarding the future of artificial intelligence (AI). While countries like France, India and China advocate a balanced approach that combines accessibility with ethical regulation, others such as the US and the UK remain wary of imposing controls, arguing that over-regulation could hinder innovation. This disagreement points to a larger question: how can AI be developed in a way that it serves humanity while minimising risks?

AI has the potential to revolutionise industries and economies, contributing an estimated $13 trillion to the global GDP by 2030.

However, its risks are equally significant. Research indicates that 78 per cent of the AI systems studied exhibit biases while deepfakes and misinformation are proliferating at an alarming rate. On the employment front, as many as 375 million workers worldwide may need to switch occupational categories due to AI-driven automation.

These statistics underscore the urgent need to embed ethics, inclusivity and cultural values into AI development. Beyond economic and technological considerations, we must ask ourselves: what is the use of AI if it contributes to the breakdown of families, loss of peace and the erosion of our value systems? Where is the inclusivity, the vision of *Sarbat da bhala* (welfare for all), espoused by Guru Nanak Dev? How can we reconcile AI's advancements with the ethos of the *Bharatiya gyan parampara* (Indian knowledge tradition)? These pressing questions demand immediate attention.

Educational institutions hold a pivotal responsibility in addressing these concerns and shaping an ethical AI ecosystem. Universities and colleges, as centres of knowledge and innovation, must take proactive steps to integrate ethical considerations into AI development.

AI education cannot remain limited to technical knowledge. Institutions must embed moral, philosophical and cultural dimensions into their curricula to prepare students to think critically about the societal impact of AI.

For instance, Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) is working on introducing courses that merge AI with philosophy, sociology and the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev. This ensures that students understand the importance of inclusivity and ethical frameworks.

Universities must also prioritise research on mitigating AI biases, enhancing transparency and preventing its misuse. Collaborative, interdisciplinary research can bridge the gap between technology and ethics, addressing diverse cultural and social contexts.

Further, educational institutions should demystify AI for the public, explaining its benefits, risks and ethical implications. By engaging with policymakers, industries and communities, universities can play a critical role in fostering trust in AI systems.

While AI has global implications, its solutions must cater to local needs. For example, GNDU's initiative to reserve 5 per cent seats for students from rural and border areas is a step towards inclusivity in technology education. Such initiatives ensure that the marginalised communities are not left behind in the AI revolution.

Guru Nanak's philosophy of 'Sarbat da bhala' provides a guiding principle for the kind of AI we should aim to develop — one that uplifts humanity, bridges divide and fosters harmony. As stewards of our cultural heritage, universities must champion these ideals to create a technology-driven yet ethically grounded society.

> Guru Nanak's philosophy of *'Sarbat da bhala'* provides a guiding principle for the kind of AI we should aim to develop.

To ensure that AI serves humanity rather than harms it, governments too have a critical role to play. The current laissez-faire approach adopted by countries like the US, driven by an impulse to dominate the AI race, is unsustainable and potentially dangerous. At the same time, excessive regulation could stifle innovation, as feared by many industry leaders. Striking the right balance requires careful policymaking and international collaboration.

Governments must work towards global and national AI governance frameworks that prioritise transparency, safety and inclusivity. These frameworks should include mechanisms to detect and mitigate biases, ensure data privacy and hold developers accountable for misuse. Policies must also reflect the cultural ethos and value systems of the nations implementing them. India, for instance, can draw from its rich heritage of *Bharatiya gyan parampara*, emphasising wisdom, inclusivity and harmony. AI development must be aligned with the vision of creating a compassionate and just society for future generations.

Governments should allocate funds to universities and research institutions for interdisciplinary studies on ethical AI. Partnerships between academia, industry and the government can accelerate innovation while ensuring ethical compliance.

In addition, governments must invest in large-scale awareness campaigns to educate citizens about AI's benefits and risks. Public participation can strengthen trust in AI systems and empower individuals to make informed decisions about their use.

As AI disrupts labour markets, governments should also prioritise skilling and reskilling initiatives to prepare workers for the emerging job roles. Special attention must be given to rural and economically disadvantaged communities to bridge the digital divide.

Ultimately, the vision for AI must align with the society we want to create. An unregulated AI rush, driven solely by profit motives, risks eroding the very values that define humanity. As Guru Nanak Dev's teachings remind us, the ultimate aim must be the welfare of all. We must strive to create AI systems that are inclusive, compassionate and equitable, ensuring they contribute to peace and harmony rather than division and chaos.

As we tread this delicate path, the collaboration between governments, educational institutions and civil society will be critical. Together, we can harness the immense potential of AI while safeguarding our values, ensuring it becomes a tool for global good rather than a force of disruption.

FOCUS: The AI Action Summit has raised concerns over ethics, inclusivity and cultural values.

States, Centre must work in harmony on education

The tiff between the Union government and the Tamil Nadu government over the former's refusal to release ₹2,150 crore due to the state as part of the in implementation of the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, a Central government initiative, as the state government was unwilling to implement the three-language policy is unfortunate and needs immediate resolution.

Education was originally a subject placed in the 'State List' of the Constitution and the Union government's role was limited to co-ordination and determination of standards in universities. It was through an amendment to the Constitution during the Emergency that the subject was listed in the 'Concurrent List', giving the Union government a greater say in education.

The Union government had in the sixties introduced the three-language policy as a means to strengthen national integration. However, there was strong objection and opposition to it as some states, mostly in the south, saw it as a ploy to impose Hindi on them. Protests had turned violent in Tamil Nadu and thereafter the state has been continuing with the two-language formula, English being the second language.

The New Education Policy-2020 of the Union government advocates the implementation of the three language policy. As per the policy document, "the three languages learned by children will be the choices of states, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India."

In a way it gives the states the freedom to choose the third language and Tamil Nadu can very well avoid the threat of an imposition of a language by the Union government. Educationists have not objected to children learning three languages; in fact they have encouraged it as long the primary education is in the mother tongue.

However, ideally, it must be left to the state governments to decide how many languages a student should learn. It is the practice all over the world that regional governments get to decide the contour of education, especially in the primary and secondary level. The Union government's policies should liit themselves to be larger framework under which the communities can organise themselves.

It is patently wrong on the part of Union education minister Dharmedra Pradhan to keep back the Central funds as hostage to the state government accepting and implementing the Union government's policy. Worse, no law or the Constitution empowers him to make a statement that Tamil Nadu has to come to terms of the Indian Constitution and that the three-language policy is the rule of law. It is a dangerous suggestion that the Tamil Nadu government, by rejecting a policy of the Union government, is defying the Constitution. The education minister must teach himself at least Article 1 of the Constitution which insists that India is a union of the states.

This is not the first time the NDA government is trying to impose its policies on states. The draft UGC regulations on appointments of vice-chancellors of state universities effectively keep the state governments out of the selection process of the vice-chancellors. Several state governments have already raised their objections to the draft regulations.

The Union government should disabuse itself of the thought that it is the master of the state governments; it is not. It must leave the authoritarian tone while communicating with the states; it must follow the traditions of democracy and dialogue, and not of threat and blackmail. The number of languages it uses for the purpose hardly matters.

TN-Centre NEP standoff needless in any language

The schism emerging between the Tamil Nadu government and the Union government over the National Education Policy (NEP) and the three-language formula is a classic case of leaders talking at each other rather than to each other. Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan's remark that Tamil Nadu will be denied Samagra Shiksha funds if it doesn't implement the NEP and the three-language formula — the state has a two-language formula for its schools — sounds much too overbearing. The backlash from Tamil leaders was prompt: CM MK Stalin called it "brash blackmail" and leaders from most parties in the state made the three-language formula needlessly about "Hindi imposition".

Both, the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government should reassess their positions. Education is on the Concurrent List, and denying funding to force states to cede ground on their roles and prerogatives on policy matters will only be perceived as coercion. Federal principles will have to be the lodestar in such matters. That said, Tamil leaders must keep in mind that the three-language formula, as worded in NEP, doesn't impose any particular language on the states. It explicitly says, "The three languages ... will be the choices of States, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India". So, students in Tamil Nadu schools can learn any Indian language, be it Telugu, Bengali, Urdu, or any other, in addition to Tamil and English. The state's anxieties are understandable given the germinal connection of its politics to linguistic identity and the campaign to promote Hindi across non-Hindi speaking regions by various dispensations at the Centre. Against this backdrop, the Centre and Tamil Nadu must open talks on reaching a solution that only has the best interests of students in mind.

UGC's flawed proposals for teacher hiring, promotions

To translate the provisions of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 into action, the University Grants Commission (UGC) began framing regulations at an unprecedented speed. It discovered an innovative method for fast execution — seeking feedback online even on complex issues that required in-person consultation.

The latest in the series of these quickly produced regulations is the Draft Regulation 2025 on minimum qualifications and eligibility conditions for appointing and promoting teachers in universities/colleges. Some provisions are considered by state governments to have far-fetching consequences, including the appointment of a vice chancellor. However, one controversial issue is the move to junk the 15-year score-based Academic Performance Indicator system (API) used in the promotion of faculty members without first pointing out the limitations of its performance through a study. The move to junk API shifts the promotion and direct recruitment processes away from objectivity to subjectivity in the assessment and evaluation of teachers.

Sukhadeo Thorat

What does the API method connote? The API method quantifies the required qualification, teaching experience, research work, and other academic contributions for the Quality Assessment Committee. This was conceived in 2010 during my tenure as chairman of the UGC, although the Indian Council of Agricultural Research adopted it a long time ago for the agriculture faculty. Why was it introduced? The UGC had pursued the institution of a pay scale for university/college teachers with the ministry of education, on a par with what exists for the Indian Administrative Service. After a lot of persuasion, the ministry agreed under the condition that, like the IAS officers, teachers should be regularly assessed. The UGC agreed to this and developed the API system.

Under the system, for an upward jump in the pay scale for an assistant professor and promotion to associate professor and, further, to professor, a faculty member was required to achieve a minimum API score based on teaching, research, and other academic achievements. The interview would only judge domain knowledge. The second reason was that quantifying academic performance would eliminate subjectivity and bring about objectivity and transparency. It would reduce or eliminate the likelihood of bias, discrimination, nepotism, prejudice, and even corruption. The API system was further improved upon during the 7th Pay Commission's term, and, accordingly, regulations were amended in 2018. The experience of the past 15 years shows that the system has proved fair, non-discriminatory, and transparent. It has also incentivised the teaching community to meet conditions for promotion by undertaking research, improving teaching, and other academic activities, including refresh and orientation courses. It indeed boosted quality and standards and brought in fair inclusion.

After 15 years of such a positive experience, the UGC, without studying and pointing out the API system's limitations, has proposed to replace it. It is nothing short of a catastrophe and a worrisome shift from a regime of objective promotions to discretionary promotions. By removing quantifiable and independently verifiable parameters, the draft regulation has made the quality of the faculty solely dependent on the selection committee, assuming members possess academic excellence, high moral character, and integrity.

Sadly, this system has seriously compromised merit-based selection in the past. Discretion has rarely been used to ensure quality and promote excellence. It is a euphemism for favouritism and discrimination, not least because of ideological differences. The new regulations' complete reliance on the selection committee's discretion has raised alarm among the faculty. The absence of clear shortlisting criteria and complete control given to the selection committee make the process completely opaque.

Surprisingly, the regulation has introduced nine new qualifications. These are: Innovative Teaching Contributions, Research or Teaching Lab Development, Consultancy/Sponsored Research Funding, Teaching Contributions in Indian Languages, Teaching-Learning and Research in Indian Knowledge Systems, Student Internship/Project Supervision, Digital Content Creation for MOOCs, Community Engagement and Service, and Start-up. None of these categories have been clearly defined. Therefore, the assessment metrics, if any, are left entirely to the selection committee's discretion. These qualifications, with limited bearing on teaching or research, potentially divert attention from the fundamental duties of teaching and research. What we know from experience — for instance, the introduction of experience in Indian Knowledge System as a criterion — is that it is biased towards Brahmanical knowledge systems, with other knowledge systems like Charvaka, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other religious sects bypassed. In fact, the regulation makes such a contribution, along with three others from the nine listed, compulsory for appointment under direct recruitment and promotion at all stages.

The selection committee is all-in-all. It has been left to the selection committee's discretion to decide whether the research publications are in peer-reviewed journals, whether the book chapters are in books published by reputed publishers, and whether a candidate's contributions in the nine areas are notable. It is obvious that in the absence of numerical marking through the API score, the scope for prejudice and discrimination is high. The sooner the UGC opens discussions with stakeholders and brings changes in a manner that ensures objectivity, promotes quality, inclusiveness, transparency, and, above all, confidence in the selection process, the better.

IT IS OBVIOUS THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF NUMERICAL MARKING THROUGH THE API SCORE, THE SCOPE FOR PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION IS HIGH

Sukhadeo Thorat is former chairman, University Grants Commission (UGC). The views expressed are personal

This is not the Kottayam I love

Ragging episode at a nursing college goes against the grain of the city of letters and development

K J Alphons

THE GRUESOME "RAGGING" of a junior nursing student at the Government Nursing College in Kottayam has shocked the nation. All five accused — arrested and remanded in police custody — are around 20 years old, just out of their teens. Apparently, the ragging started three months ago, in the second week of November. A video, allegedly shot by one of the perpetrators of the crime, is available to the police as well. It shows the student on a cot with his hands and legs tied up, seniors jabbing him with a sharp object and pouring some lotion into his mouth. The victim was so scared that he did not inform his parents, classmates or the college authorities till this week.

Possibly, he was aware of the fate of Sidharthan, a 20-year-old student at the College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Pookode in Kerala's Wayanad district, a year ago. He was allegedly ragged for months by members of the college's dominant student union, associated with the ruling dispensation in Kerala. He was found hanging in his hostel toilet. The police claimed it was suicide. But most people did not buy the story. They believed it was murder. The college administration pretended that they knew nothing about what was happening, even though most of the ragging reportedly occurred in common areas of the hostel. Similarly, in the Kottayam incident, the nursing college administration claimed that they knew nothing about what happened, though it had been going on for three months.

Victims are mostly scared to complain because students' unions are powerful in Kerala, like the trade unions. In the highly politicised environment in universities, vice-chancellors are not often seen as going against the powers that be. In most cases, impunity is the order of the day. Little wonder that freshers in college, who are just in their teens, decide to suffer through the pain, even when there is a danger to their lives. Despite the prevalence of "ragging" in Kerala colleges, it has not been so violent in the past. The state also enacted a law banning "ragging". Still, the college authorities often turn a blind eye out of fear and political affiliations.

I am completely shocked and ashamed. I am from Kottayam, and I was its district collector from 1988 to 1991. Kottayam has so much to boast about. It became the first town in the county to achieve 100 per cent literacy in 1989. The entire country celebrated it. It became the role model for the national literacy mission. It was a collaborative effort of the district administration, M G University, municipal authorities, political parties and the citizens at large.

Eventually, Kottayam became the most literate district in the country in 1990. It achieved a quality of health index better than the US in 1990. The "Mass Contact Programme" we started in 1989 — we took the entire district administration to the pre-determined panchayats — won the highest UN award for innovation in governance. As per Niti Aayog's latest assessment, Kottayam is the only zero-poverty district in the country. Malayala Manorama, the largest circulating newspaper in India after Dainik Jagran, is published in Kottayam. One of the largest publishers in India, in terms of titles published, DC Books, is from Kottayam. One of India's best tourist destinations, Kumarakom, is in Kottayam. It is globally acknowledged that Kerala's nurses are among the best in the world. They are kind, compassionate and professional. Many girls pursue nursing because it is a guarantee for an independent and dignified life. A large number of nurses come from the Kottayam district.

How come such a city — of letters and accomplishments — produces such people whose brutality against their fellow students shocks the whole world? I do not know the exact answer. I cannot comprehend the psyche of these criminals, who derive so much pleasure from inflicting pain on their college mates. What do they gain from it? Where did they learn to be so brutal? After all, they were out of school just a couple of years ago, and many of them are still teenagers. Did they learn this in school? Did they acquire these violent traits from their families? Or do they feel the need to assert their masculinity in college as part of the student union? Or is it social media, which serves as the primary influence on our youngsters?

I think the ultimate responsibility lies with the parents of these students. How many parents today have a conversation with their children at least three times a week on fundamental issues? A secondary responsibility lies with our schools, where the foundations of ethics and morality should be taught. Today, all that they care about are marks, ranks and entrance examinations.

I think we need to take a hard look at what is going wrong.

I still love Kottayam. A few people can't destroy a city and its culture.

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Campus Torture

The horrific case of ragging and torture at a nursing college in Kerala is yet another grim reminder of the deeply ingrained culture of abuse in educational institutions. Despite strict anti-ragging laws and awareness campaigns, the problem persists, revealing systemic failures that go beyond individual incidents. This is not just about bullying; it is about institutionalised violence, a culture of silence, and the alarming politicisation of student life. Ragging has long been dismissed as an unfortunate but routine aspect of student life. In reality, it is nothing short of organised brutality. The persistence of such incidents, even in professional institutions meant to train individuals for noble professions, raises critical questions about accountability. Why do colleges and universities fail to prevent such atrocities? The answer lies in a mix of administrative negligence, student group dominance, and a lack of real consequences for perpetrators. The excuse that ragging fosters camaraderie is a dangerous myth. It does not create bonds ~ it creates trauma. Victims, if they survive, often carry psychological scars for life. Worse, they may go on to perpetuate the same abuse, trapping generations of students in a cycle of violence. This is not initiation; it is indoctrination into a system where dominance is equated with power, and suffering is normalised. One of the key factors sustaining this toxic culture is the stranglehold that student organisations, often affiliated with larger political parties, have over college life. Educational spaces that should nurture intellectual freedom and academic pursuit instead become battlegrounds for power struggles. Many students are forced to align with dominant groups for self-preservation, while those who resist face social exclusion or worse, physical harm. The politicisation of campuses has also diluted institutional accountability. When student leaders are affiliated with powerful parties, disciplinary action against them is often slow or non-existent. This emboldens perpetrators, creating an atmosphere where ragging is not just tolerated but, in some cases, even encouraged as a tool to maintain control. The tragic deaths of students due to ragging-related abuse are not isolated cases; they are symptoms of a much deeper disease. Kerala was one of the first states to introduce a strong anti-ragging law, yet incidents continue unabated. The legal framework is only as effective as its implementation. Colleges often downplay ragging cases to protect their reputation, and victims are discouraged from filing complaints due to fear of retaliation. Even when arrests happen, the perpetrators frequently face lenient consequences, sending a dangerous message that ragging is a survivable offense rather than a crime. For real change, authorities need to move beyond reactive measures and focus on proactive interventions. Strict enforcement of laws, independent monitoring committees, and immediate action against offenders must become standard practice. More importantly, students need safe channels to report abuse without fear of reprisal. Ragging is not just a legal issue; it is a cultural one. It thrives in environments where power hierarchies are glorified and student voices are stifled.

संस्कृत पर सस्ती राजनीति का परिचय

संस्कृत की महत्ता वे लोग नहीं समझ सकते, जो विभाजनकारी राजनीति करने की ताक में रहते हैं

प्रणय कुमार

संस्कृत में अनुवाद पर आपत्ति जताते दयानिधि मारन ● एएनआइ

भारतवर्ष विविधता का उत्सव मनाने वाला देश है। भिन्न-भिन्न वेश-भूषा, खान-पान, रहन-सहन, भाषा-बोली के बावजूद हमारी आंतरिक एकता दुनिया को चमत्कृत करती है। महाकुंभ इसका जीवंत उदाहरण है, परंतु विभाजनकारी राजनीति करने वाले दल एवं राजनेता उत्तर-दक्षिण के कल्पित भेद-भाव एवं भाषाई अस्मिता के नाम पर भारत को बांटना चाहते हैं। वे भाषा को ज्ञान, परंपरा एवं संस्कृति के अजस्र स्रोत, धरोहर तथा अभिव्यक्ति एवं संवाद का माध्यम मानने के बजाय राजनीति का जरिया बनाना चाहते हैं। कदाचित इसीलिए सनातन संस्कृति पर अनेक अपमानजनक एवं घृणास्पद टिप्पणियां करने के बाद अब डीएमके और उसके नेता संस्कृत के विरुद्ध भी विषवमन कर रहे हैं। सदन की कार्यवाही का संस्कृत में तत्काल अनुवाद कराए जाने का विरोध समझ से परे है। ऐसा भी नहीं है कि यह सुविधा केवल संस्कृत में ही उपलब्ध कराई गई हो, बल्कि संस्कृत के साथ-साथ अब बोडो, डोगरी, मैथिली, मणिपुरी और उर्दू में भी सदन की कार्यवाही का तत्काल रूपांतरण होगा। उल्लेखनीय है कि अंग्रेजी और हिंदी के अलावा असमिया, बांग्ला, गुजराती, कन्नड़, मलयालम, मराठी, उड़िया, पंजाबी, तमिल, तेलुगु जैसी भाषाओं में एक साथ अनुवाद की सुविधा पहले से ही उपलब्ध है।

भारत सरकार का लक्ष्य संविधान से मान्यता प्राप्त सभी 22 भाषाओं में अनुवाद की सुविधा उपलब्ध कराने का है। इसे विडंबना ही कहेंगे कि भाषाई विविधता को प्रोत्साहित करने की भारतीय संसद की इस समावेशी एवं लोकतांत्रिक पहल की जहां विभिन्न मंचों पर मुक्त कंठ से प्रशंसा हो रही है, वहीं भारत में संकीर्ण राजनीतिक स्वार्थों की सिद्धि के लिए उस पर अनावश्यक आपत्ति की जा रही है। लोकसभा अध्यक्ष ओम बिरला ने डीएमके नेता दयानिधि मारन की संस्कृत अनुवाद पर आपत्ति पर खेद जताते हुए बिल्कुल ठीक प्रश्न किया कि "आप दुनिया के किस देश में रह रहे हो? यह भारत है और भारत की मूल भाषा संस्कृत रही है। हमने 22 भाषाओं में अनुवाद की बात कही, परंतु आपको केवल संस्कृत एवं हिंदी पर ही क्यों आपत्ति है?" दरअसल इस प्रकरण ने डीएमके के असली चेहरे को उजागर करने का काम किया है।

यह दुर्भाग्यपूर्ण है कि अनेकानेक विशेषताओं से सुसंपन्न तथा विज्ञान एवं तकनीक की दृष्टि से सर्वथा उपयुक्त होने पर भी संस्कृत की घनघोर उपेक्षा की गई। जबकि तथ्य यह है कि बार-बार के शोध एवं अनुसंधान के निष्कर्ष में संस्कृत को कंप्यूटर एवं आर्टिफिशियल इंटेलिजेंस के लिए सर्वाधिक उपयुक्त भाषा बताया गया। जैसा लिखा जाता है, ठीक वैसा ही पढ़े और बोले जाने के कारण कंप्यूटर के लिए संस्कृत सबसे सटीक एवं वैज्ञानिक भाषा मानी गई है। स्वर-तंत्री, प्राणवायु, मुखाव्यव आदि के आधार पर ध्वनियों एवं वर्णों का वैज्ञानिक अनुक्रम, धातु-रचना, शब्द-निर्माण, पदक्रम, पद-लालित्य, वाक्य-विन्यास, अर्थ-विस्तार आदि की दृष्टि से यह अनुपम एवं अद्वितीय भाषा है। संसार की अन्य भाषाओं में जहां किसी वस्तु एवं व्यक्ति विशेष के लिए प्रचलित शब्दों के पीछे का तार्किक आधार, कारण एवं प्रयोजन स्पष्ट कर पाना अत्यंत कठिन है, वहीं संस्कृत में गुण-धर्म-अर्थ आदि के आधार पर वस्तुओं-व्यक्तियों के नामकरण का औचित्य सिद्ध किया जा सकता है। इसमें सूत्रों में बात

कही जा सकती है। यहां छंदों का अनुशासन है, अराजकता का व्याकरण नहीं। यह लय-सुर-ताल की भाषा है। जहां लय है, वहीं गति है और गति ही जीवन तथा जड़ता ही मृत्यु है। इसलिए संस्कृत जीवन की भाषा और जीवन का मंत्र है।

संसार की प्राचीनतम भाषाओं में से एक होने के कारण देश-विदेश की अधिकांश भाषाओं में प्रयुक्त शब्दावली के साथ संस्कृत की अद्भुत साम्यता दिखती है। भारत की अधिकांश बोलियों एवं भाषाओं की जननी होने के कारण यह राष्ट्रीय एकता एवं अखंडता में अत्यधिक सहायक है। विश्व की अन्य सभ्यताएं जब संवाद के लिए बोलियां भी विकसित नहीं कर पाई थीं, तब संस्कृत में वेदों के छंद रचे जा रहे थे, जो आज भी जीवन एवं दर्शन के श्रेष्ठतम काव्य माने जाते हैं। वेदों के पश्चात उपनिषद, रामायण, महाभारत, श्रीमद्भागवत, आरण्यक, ब्राह्मण ग्रंथ और पुराणों की रचना भी संस्कृत में ही हुई है। कला, संगीत, साहित्य, संस्कृति, योग, आयुर्वेद, धर्म, दर्शन, नीति एवं इतिहास से लेकर गणित, विज्ञान, भूगोल, भूगर्भ, खगोल, ज्योतिष, वास्तु आदि तक जीवन और जगत का शायद ही कोई ऐसा क्षेत्र हो, जिनमें संस्कृत-ग्रंथों की उपलब्धता एवं विपुलता न हो। आदि शंकर, रामानुजाचार्य, मध्वाचार्य मीमांसकों से लेकर अन्य सभी ऋषियों-मनीषियों एवं भारतीय दार्शनिकों ने संस्कृत को ही अपनी स्वानुभूति एवं दर्शन की विवेचना का माध्यम बनाया। इसी कारण आज आवश्यकता इसकी है कि संस्कृत का प्रचार-प्रसार कैसे बढ़े।

संस्कृत के विरोधियों को कदाचित यह स्मरण नहीं रहा कि संविधान की प्रारूप समिति के अध्यक्ष एवं देश के प्रथम विधि मंत्री डा. भीमराव अंबेडकर ने भी भारतीय संघ की राजभाषा के रूप में संस्कृत की ही पैरवी की थी। क्या दयानिधि जैसे नेता उन्हें भी राष्ट्रीय स्वयंसेवक संघ का नेता या कार्यकर्ता घोषित करेंगे? सच तो यह है कि संस्कृत देश को जोड़ने वाली भाषा है, जो विभाजनकारी राजनीति करने वालों को शायद ही समझ आए।

(लेखक शिक्षाविद एवं सामाजिक संस्था 'शिक्षा-सोपान' के संस्थापक है)
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The deeper meaning of declining school enrolment

As the world's most populous country, India hopes to reap its demographic dividend due to its burgeoning youth population. Demographers and policy planners always knew that this window of opportunity would remain open, but only for a limited time. Declining school enrolment over the past decade marks the beginning of the end of this period. This means that India may become older even before becoming rich.

It is no wonder that the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (U-DISE+) data for 2022-23 and 2023-24, which was released by the Ministry of Education on December 30, 2024, caused much consternation as it showed a 15.5 million drop (6%) in school enrolment since 2018-19.

The official line versus the reality

Official sources have attributed the decline in enrolment to improvements in data collection. They explain that seeding Aadhaar numbers with enrolment eliminates multiple enrolments. This may sound plausible because it has long been suspected that some children are enrolled in multiple schools.

However, an analysis of decade-long data (2014-15 to 2023-24) on enrolment and its correlation with different independent variables, including the changes in the population in the age groups relevant to schooling, tells a different story. In fact, it shows a rather grim picture. The needle points toward the beginning of the end of the era of reaping the demographic dividend.

It is a matter of concern that school enrolment has plummeted by 24.51 million, or 9.45%, over the past decade, with elementary-level enrolment registering a rather pronounced fall of 18.7 million (13.45%). Up to this level, education has been free and compulsory under the Right to Education (RTE) Act since 2009.

In comparison, secondary-level enrolment declined by 1.43 million (3.75%), whereas senior secondary-level enrolments have increased by

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It could mark the beginning of the end of the India's demographic dividend and a population aging before it becomes rich

3.63 million (15.46%) over the decade. This means that the decline began only recently.

Government and private schools

The data further show that enrolment in government and government-aided schools, which account for more than 65% of the total school enrolment (and the mainstay of the poor and marginalised sections of society), recorded a significantly higher decline: by 19.89 million (13.8%) and 4.95 million (16.41%), respectively.

In these schools, too, the decline in enrolment at the elementary level has been rather pronounced: 21.78 million (18.31%) in government schools and 3.85 million (24.34%) in government-aided schools. They have also experienced lower enrolment at the secondary level, albeit at a lower rate.

Private unaided schools have been an exception, as their total enrolment increased by 1.61 million, or 2.03%. Notably, however, they registered only a marginal increase in elementary and secondary level enrolment, though their senior secondary-level enrolment surged by 1.41 million (15.55%). These schools seemingly bucked the trend but did not remain entirely unaffected.

Enrolment has declined across the board and persisted since 2014-15, particularly at the elementary levels. They can neither be ascribed to methodological changes nor dismissed as a one-off temporary event. They reflect a systematic transition. The nation is at the cusp of a paradigm shift, and one does not have to go too far to prove this point.

It may not be a coincidence that the country's school-going population in the age group of 6-17 years has also declined by 17.30 million (5.78%) over the past decade. The decline in the population in the age groups of 6-13 and 14-15 years, relevant to enrolment at the elementary and secondary levels, has dropped by 18.7 million (9.12%) and 2.17 million (4.35%), respectively.

Delving deeper, the data discern a statistically significant strong positive correlation between

school enrolment and the estimated population in the relevant age group, so much so that the decline in the population of the relevant age group explains the 60.36% decline in enrolment.

The finding is further corroborated by the fact that the number of schools in the country has also declined by 79,109, from 1.55 million in 2017-18 to 1.47 million in 2023-14, a decline of 5.1%. These are in sync with the fact that India's fertility rate declined to 2.01 in 2022, which is far below the replacement level of 2.10. The persistent plummeting of school enrolment is mainly due to demographic changes, which do not augur well for the country.

The social impact

A burgeoning youth population is necessary for enrolment growth, which India has been experiencing until recently. It has now entered the phase when the population bulge is shifting to the right. Since the process began only recently, it is reflected rather sharply in elementary-level enrolment. The effect will gradually but firmly be felt in secondary and senior secondary-level enrolment, and will finally impinge on higher education.

As is already the case in most developed countries, we will soon face the transition to a shrinking working-age population. This is disconcerting because it is happening sooner than expected.

Ideally, a country must reap as much demographic dividend as possible to generate much-needed income and wealth to support and sustain the burden of an ageing population. India will likely see its population age even before becoming rich.

Declining school enrolment has less to do with the change in data collection method than a shift in the demographic bulge to the right. Unless the 2021 Census, which is yet to begin, presents a different demographic trend, it could mark the beginning of the end of the demographic dividend for India.

Eroding federalism

Central funding for States in education should be delinked from the NEP

By withholding Tamil Nadu's central share of Samagra Shiksha funds for rejecting the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), the Union Government is flexing its muscles to coerce States into submission. This move also undermines the intent of the Samagra Shiksha scheme (2018-19), which consolidated the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and Teacher Education programmes. The scheme was designed to ensure equitable access to quality education for all schoolchildren. Since last year, Tamil Nadu has repeatedly flagged the non-disbursal of ₹2,152 crore, warning that the funding shortfall has severely strained its school education infrastructure, affecting nearly 40 lakh students and 32,000 staff members. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has explicitly blamed the State for the impasse, declaring that the funds will be released only if Tamil Nadu implements the NEP in "letter and spirit". Adding fuel to the fire, he has insisted that the State adopt the three-language formula, mandating Tamil, English, and a regional language in schools. This stance disregards Tamil Nadu's long-standing opposition to the trilingual system, dating back to 1937, and its firm commitment to a two-language policy of Tamil and English since 1968. Going a step further, Mr. Pradhan has accused Tamil Nadu's leadership of being divisive and politically motivated. He even suggested that the State needs to "come to terms with the Indian Constitution" and adhere to the "rule of law", implying, quite unwarrantedly, that the State was not being run in line with the statute.

Unsurprisingly, the response in Tamil Nadu has been swift and sharp, especially on the language issue, which remains non-negotiable for most political parties in the State. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has rightly questioned which constitutional provision mandates the three-language policy and warned that such blatant coercion will not be tolerated. While the NEP claims it does not "impose Hindi", successive Union Governments have, until now, respected Tamil Nadu's autonomy over its language policy. Policies governing subjects in the Concurrent List of the Constitution require flexibility and dialogue to ensure successful implementation across diverse regions. A rigid, one-size-fits-all approach risks undermining cooperative federalism and fostering resentment among States, which are equal stakeholders in central schemes. A more pragmatic approach would be to delink Samagra Shiksha and the Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) scheme from the NEP and instead tie funding to generic performance indicators. At the same time, Tamil Nadu would do well to finalise and roll out its long-pending State Education Policy as a viable alternative to the NEP, ensuring academic continuity and stability for its students.

Cracking CUET: A step-by-step guide to smart preparation

PANKAJ **DHINGRA**

By understanding the exam format, setting clear goals, and following an organised study schedule, students can cover the syllabus while boosting confidence

Preparing for the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) can feel overwhelming, especially when juggling schoolwork and other responsibilities. However, CUET has transformed the university admissions process and a well-structured preparation plan can help you cover the syllabus effectively while boosting your confidence. By following a strategic approach over a few months, you can significantly enhance your chances of success.

Step 1: Understand the CUET Exam Structure
Before diving into preparation, familiarise yourself with the exam format. CUET typically consists of Language, Domain-Specific Subjects, and a General Test. It is essential to obtain the official syllabus for each section and review it thoroughly. Understanding the types of questions, including multiple-choice and short-answer formats, is crucial. Be mindful of the marking scheme, particularly any negative marking.

Step 2: Assess Your Readiness: Start by evaluating your current knowledge and preparedness. Ask your-self whether you have covered the syllabus for all sections, how confident you feel about scoring well on a scale of 1 to 5, and which section you find most challenging.

Step 3: Set Clear Goals
Define your objectives based on your preferred university and course. Research the CUET score requirements for institutions like Delhi University, Banaras Hindu University and JNU. Having a clear goal will keep you motivated and focused throughout your preparation journey.

Step 4: Allocate Study Time
Using insights from your self-assessment, create a balanced study plan. If you are strong in certain subjects, spend less time on them but focus on regular revision. Dedicate more time to weaker subjects to better understand concepts and solve practice ques-tions. For example, if the General Test is particularly challenging, allocate 1.5–2 hours daily to this section while spending an hour on Language or Domain-Specific Subjects.

Step 5: Weekly Study Schedule A well-structured timetable ensures consisten-cy. A practical approach is to focus on one major subject per day from Monday to Friday. Saturday can be ded-icated to taking mock tests and analysing performance, while Sunday should be reserved for reviewing the week's progress, revising dif-ficult topics, and taking time to relax and recharge. Using time-blocking techniques by dividing the day into study, practice, and relaxation slots can be highly effective.

Step 6: Right Study Resources Relying on quali-ty study materials is essential. NCERT textbooks provide conceptual clarity, while CUET-specific guides and reference books offer target-ed preparation. Online plat-forms that provide mock tests and video lectures can be valuable resources. Practicing with previous years' ques-tion papers helps in identify-ing important topics and understanding question trends.

Step 7: Regular Mock Tests Mock tests play a crucial role in CUET preparation. Aim to take at least one full-length test per week and gradually increase the frequency as the exam approaches.

Step 8: Exam Logistics Since CUET is a computer-based test, familiarising yourself with the technical require-ments is necessary. Marking significant dates on a calen-dar will help in avoiding last-minute surprises.

Step 9: Maintain a Balance Avoiding burnout is vital for effective preparation. Incorporate short breaks into your study routine and engage in activities like exer-cise or meditation to stay refreshed. Ensuring you get seven to eight hours of sleep daily will help in maintaining focus and energy levels.

Step 10: Stay Positive Consistency is the key to achieving success in CUET. Sticking to your study plan while remaining adaptable to changes will be beneficial.

(The writer is Managing Partner, FinTram Global LLP; views are personal)

India, Teach Thyself

What Odisha tragedy says to foreign students here

Nepalese student Prakriti Lamsal's death by suicide at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology in Bhubaneswar is tragic; and a wake-up call for GOI, which wants India to become an education hub for developing countries. KIIT seemingly disregarded Prakriti's complaints of harassment against an Indian student. Later, without investigation, it labelled her suicide a result of heartbreak. When hundreds of other Nepalese students protested, they were bundled out to Cuttack railway station and told to stay away. In one viral video, two KIIT staff are heard shouting at them that the institute's expenditure on tuition and board exceeds Nepal's budget. Such arrogance! By this logic, Indians in US should shop at Walmart with a sense of gratitude because the retail giant's revenue exceeds GOI's budget.

The case snowballed into a diplomatic issue. Nepal's PM Oli raised it, Indian embassy in Nepal gave an assurance, Odisha govt pulled levers, the institute apologised, urging evicted students to return. It also "removed from service" the two loudmouth officers. In 2013, many had scoffed when a global survey claimed India was among the most racist countries. But ask students from Africa who have suffered racial abuse here. The Jan night in 2014 when a Delhi minister led a 'raid' against Nigerians is a stain that won't wash. Our record on people from our own Northeast isn't great either. Surveys showed how they were stigmatised as 'Chinese' during the pandemic. Now, this case has blown up in Nepal, biggest source of foreign students to India – 13,126 of 46,878 in 2021-22. Oli anyway has been showing off his China tilt. India wants 500,000 foreign students a year by 2047, but is stuck at the 50,000 mark. Accepting what's wrong might be a good place to start.

OUT SIDE
IN SIDE
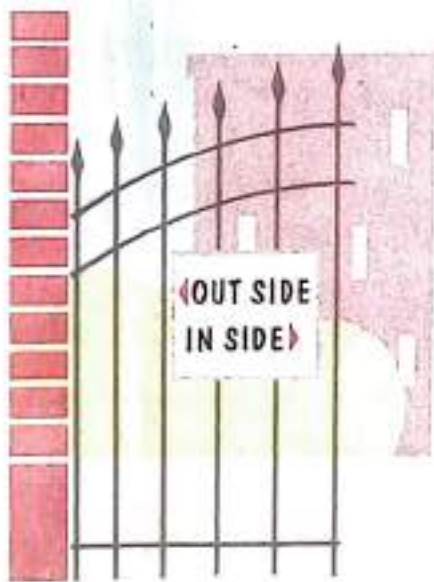
Targeting a war hero

Row over martyr's school reeks of intolerance

AN abominable attempt has been made to erase the memory of a martyr — and that too a Param Vir Chakra awardee. Six decades after Company Quarter Master Havildar Abdul Hamid took on the might of Patton tanks and made the supreme sacrifice in the 1965 India-Pakistan war, his family had to fight a battle of its own to get his name reinstated at the main gate of his school in Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh. 'Shaheed Hamid Vidyalaya' was not good enough for the authorities; they not only renamed it 'PM Shri Composite School' but also promptly effected the change at the entrance to the institution. The outraged kin complained to the headmaster, who asked them to approach the local education officer. The glaring omission has finally been rectified, but the whole controversy reeks of religious intolerance and insensitivity.

Havildar Hamid's award citation mentions in glowing terms that his bravery "in the face of constant enemy fire was in the highest traditions of the Army". *Naam, namak, nishan* — these words sum up the code of honour of the Indian defence forces. The Indian Army, Air Force and Navy are secular organisations — their officers and soldiers serve the nation with pride irrespective of their religion, caste, creed or gender. The entire country owes gratitude to bravehearts like Hamid, not just the community to which they belonged.

Degrading a war hero simply because he professed a certain religion shows how deep the communal rot runs. Exemplary action should be taken against overzealous officials who stooped so low. They were apparently trying to please their political bosses and chose a soft target. Thankfully, the widespread uproar has exposed their nefarious designs. The incident should serve as a warning to the political leadership and the bureaucracy to desist from chipping away at the military's apolitical ethos.

NTA यह ग़लती सुधार ले तो बदलेंगे हालात

भूपेंद्र शर्मा

इस साल हुए पहले बड़े एग्जाम जॉइंट एंट्रेंस एग्जामिनेशन (JEE- MAIN) के प्रश्नपत्रों पर फिर से सवाल उठ गए हैं। परीक्षा सुधारों की कड़ी में कंप्यूटर बेस्ड टेस्ट (CBT) को अपनाने पर ज्यादा फोकस किया जा रहा है, फिर भी लगातार प्रश्नपत्रों में गलत या सिलेबस से बाहर के सवाल आ रहे हैं। देश में परीक्षा सुधारों के लिए शिक्षा मंत्रालय की डॉ. के. राधाकृष्णन कमिटी की रिपोर्ट आने के बाद भी न तो पेपर सेट करने वालों की जवाबदेही तय हुई है, न पेपर सेटिंग की प्रक्रिया सुधरी है।

NTA पर सवाल | परीक्षाओं में सुधार का रोडमैप गंभीरता से लागू करना है तो इसके लिए पेपर सेट करने के तरीकों में बदलाव बहुत जरूरी है। देश में 23 IIT में दाखिले के लिए होने वाली JEE (Advanced) की परीक्षा को लेकर ज्यादा सवाल नहीं उठते, क्योंकि जवाबदेही एक IIT की होती है। ऐसे में सवाल है कि नैशनल टेस्टिंग एजेंसी (NTA) की इंजीनियरिंग, मेडिकल, यूनिवर्सिटी एंट्रेंस टेस्ट (CUET) जैसे बड़े एंट्रेंस टेस्ट में ही क्यों गड़बड़ियां होती हैं? इन सवालों के जवाब तलाशना ज्यादा मुश्किल नहीं है।

तय हो जवाबदेही | पहले तो पेपर सेट करने वालों की जवाबदेही तय हो। पेपर सेटिंग की प्रक्रिया में देश के बड़े संस्थानों के एक्सपर्ट्स को शामिल करना होगा। IP यूनिवर्सिटी में एग्जामिनेशन की जिम्मेदारी संभाल चुके ब्रिगेडियर प्रदीप कुमार उपमन्यु का कहना है कि जिन प्रफेसरों को पेपर सेट करने की जिम्मेदारी दी जाती है, वे अपने रिसर्च असिस्टेंट या रिसर्च स्कॉलरों से पेपर सेट करवा देते हैं। ऐसे में गलतियां होनी लाजिमी है। बेहतर होगा कि पेपर सेट करने वालों को कैंपस में बुलाकर सवाल तय करवाए जाएं।

बार-बार गलती | NTA का इंफॉर्मेशन बुलेटिन कहता है कि सभी

Al image

कॉमन रूम

जरूरी उपाय बरतने के बाद भी अगर कोई गलत सवाल आता है तो सभी छात्रों को उस सवाल के पूरे नंबर दे दिए जाएंगे। गलत सवाल करीब-करीब हर वर्ष आ रहे हैं। यानी पेपर सेटिंग की प्रक्रिया में गड़बड़ी है और इसे ठीक नहीं किया जा रहा है। NTA का दावा है कि इस बार 6 गलत सवाल आए हैं, और इतने ही विदेश में हुए एग्जाम सेंटरों में भी आए हैं। इस तरह से 12 गलत क्वेश्चन का दावा किया जा रहा है।

सवालों का लेवल | जब तक क्वेश्चन पेपर को मानक के मुताबिक तैयार नहीं किया जाता, तब तक यह समस्या बरकरार रहेगी। क्वेश्चन पेपर का ठीक से वर्गीकरण किया जाना भी जरूरी है। ध्यान रहे, दो सवालों का लेवल एक जैसा नहीं हो सकता। दो शिफ्ट में एग्जाम देने वालों में से एक छात्र से भारत का क्षेत्रफल पूछा गया तो दूसरे से मलेशिया का। कंप्यूटर की नजर में तो दोनों सवाल एक लेवल के हैं, लेकिन एक छात्र की नजर में इनमें भारत-मलेशिया का अंतर है।

स्कोर कार्ड की समस्या | छात्रों का एक बड़ा सवाल यह भी है कि परीक्षा में नॉर्मलाइजेशन में सभी को बराबरी के मौके नहीं मिल पाते। विशेषज्ञ भी मानते हैं कि देश में अपनाए जाने वाले नॉर्मलाइजेशन और पर्सेंटाइल के फॉर्मूले से छात्रों के स्कोर कार्ड में एक से तीन फीसदी तक की वेरिएशन बने रहने की संभावना रहती है। इस समस्या का भी समाधान अभी तक नहीं खोजा गया है।

INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

WHY LEARNING IN YOUR MOTHER TONGUE IS IMPORTANT

Educationists welcome the Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme, announced in the Union Budget 2025, as a step towards making education more accessible and inclusive by providing digital books in Indian languages

ANINDITA ACHARYA

SCENE 1: A mother and her 12-year-old daughter step into a bookstore at the recently concluded 48th Kolkata International Book Fair. As she glances at the shelves, she says in Bengali, "Let's leave. There are no English books here."
SCENE 2: A father is taken aback when he hears that his friend has enrolled his son in a Bengali-medium school. "Without learning English, there's no future," he remarks.

In today's world, where technology dominates our lives, are we moving away from our mother tongue? Does working and communicating in one's native language make a person seem less educated than someone fluent in English? And is it really something to be proud of if one struggles with their mother tongue or claims not to know it well?

Language shapes our sense of home and belonging. Speaking in one's mother tongue feels like home. Yet, many urban Indian families are losing that connection as children grow up without fluency in their native language. But history tells a different story—India's greatest literary minds, from Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali) and Munshi Premchand (Hindi) to Subramania Bharati (Tamil), Gopinath Mohanty (Odia), and KP Kesava Menon (Malayalam), wrote in their mother tongue.

Studies show that learning in one's regional language improves understanding, retention, and engagement. It also strengthens cultural identity and pride. Recognising this, the Union Budget 2025 introduced the Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme, announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. This initiative aims to provide digital books in Indian languages for school and college students, making education more accessible. Learning through one's native language not only enhances comprehension but also creates a more inclusive and empowered generation.

"The Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme of the Union Budget 2025 is a major move towards democratising education by making education accessible through Indian languages. With digital books in local languages, the scheme tackles one of the basic hurdles to education: the language divide that typically keeps students from fully participating in their studies when material is mostly in English or Hindi. The advantages of this strategy are many: students are able to understand complex ideas better in their own language, resulting in better understanding and retention; they are able to learn critical thinking without the hassle of processing information in a second language; and they are able to stay connected to their roots while accessing contemporary education," said Dr MM Ramya, Dean of AM Jain College.

Around 37% of students in low- and middle-income countries are not taught in the language they understand best. In India, this figure stands at about 35%, including many children in English-medium schools, according to a UNICEF report. Indian education policies have acknowledged the importance of the mother tongue in early schooling. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes teaching in the mother tongue or local language up to Class 5 and, where possible, up to Class 8. Data from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (2020-21) shows that instruction in grades 1 to 5 is already available in 28 languages. The launch of the Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Scheme marks another important move toward making education more accessible, especially in rural and remote areas, while preserving India's rich linguistic heritage, said Rajeev Tiwari, Co-founder of STEMROBO Technologies. "This will further encourage students to embrace modern learning tools while staying connected to their cultural roots," he said. Odisha's Department of Women and Child Development, in collaboration with UNICEF, introduced 'Nua Arunima' (New Horizons)—a mother tongue-based early childhood education curriculum available in 21 languages. Designed for children aged 3 to 6 attending Anganwadis, this initiative aims to strengthen early learning in regional languages.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected mother-tongue education as well. A UNESCO report mentioned that school closures worsened existing education gaps worldwide. While schools were shut for an average of 20 weeks, some remained closed for over 70 weeks, more than a full school year. "Students typically grasp concepts better in their mother tongue, which can help achieve thriving learning outcomes. This digital transformation in regional language education supports India's vision of inclusive growth while preserving linguistic diversity in education," said Sachin Alug, CEO, NLB Services.

In today's globalised world, education is becoming increasingly multilingual. As businesses expand across borders and cultures intertwine, knowing multiple languages is an advantage. This has also made multilingual education more important than ever. It emphasises learning in both the mother tongue and additional languages, helping students become proficient in multiple languages and preparing them for a diverse world. "English is the global language of business, but knowing one's mother tongue is essential for understanding culture, ethos, and literature," said Anil Acharya, a well-known Bengali scholar, and founder of Anustup, a Bengali publishing house. "In today's diverse world, being bilingual or multilingual is a valuable asset."

Our native language is an important part of our identity. It is a source of pride and a connection to our heritage. Learning in the mother tongue helps children develop better thinking and communication skills while making it easier to learn other languages. This International Mother Language Day, let's promise to celebrate the importance of linguistic, cultural diversity, and multilingualism.

> Language shapes our sense of home and belonging. Speaking in one's mother tongue feels like home

POWER OF MOTHER TONGUE:
LEARNING, EXPRESSION & IDENTITY

DR SAMKU BOSE

As the world commemorates International Mother Language Day on February 21, we are reminded of the deep connection between language, thought, and identity. First proclaimed by UNESCO in 1999, this day honours the sacrifices of students in 1952 Dhaka (then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), who gave their lives advocating for their right to use their mother tongue, Bengali. Their struggle highlights a universal truth—language is more than just a tool of communication; it is the foundation of culture, thought, and self-expression.

Research in cognitive science strongly supports the idea that learning and thinking in one's native language leads to better conceptual clarity, deeper understanding, and stronger critical reasoning. When children receive education in a language they fully understand, they grasp concepts more naturally, retain information better, and express ideas with greater precision. In contrast, a second-language medium can act as a cognitive barrier, often limiting creativity and analytical thinking. This is why UNESCO and the World Bank consistently emphasise the importance of mother-tongue-based education, particularly in early learning years.

Recognising this, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has taken a significant step by advocating education in the mother tongue at least until Grade 5, and preferably beyond. This marks a major shift in a country where English-medium education has long been seen as a marker of privilege. India, with its 121 languages and over 270 mother tongues, has historically struggled to balance linguistic diversity in education. The emphasis on regional languages through NEP 2020 is a much-needed move to bridge learning gaps, reduce dropouts, and empower students across socio-economic backgrounds.

Several Indian states have already started implementing this vision. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Odisha have introduced regional language textbooks and learning resources, while the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) has launched engineering courses in 11 Indian languages, making technical education more inclusive. These efforts align with global trends—China's emphasis on Mandarin and Germany's use of German in technical education have resulted in higher scientific output and innovation rates. In contrast, many post-colonial nations still face challenges where education in a foreign language leads to lower literacy rates and diminished self-confidence among students.

History offers remarkable examples of individuals who, despite early education in a foreign language, later embraced their mother tongue and made profound contributions. Aurobindo Ghose (Sri Aurobindo) was educated entirely in English, both in India and abroad. It was only at the age of 21 that he consciously learned Bengali, yet he went on to become one of the most influential thinkers and writers in Indian literature. His journey demonstrates how reconnecting with one's native language can unlock cultural depth, intellectual richness, and national consciousness.

A similar example is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer, who initially wrote in English, but later rejected it in favour of his mother tongue, Gikuyu. His famous book 'Decolonising the Mind' argues that language is not just a medium but a carrier of identity, history, and self-worth. Writing in one's own language, he believed, was an act of intellectual liberation. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi, despite his legal training in English, strongly advocated for vernacular education, believing that true self-rule (Swaraj) would only be possible if Indians embraced their native languages. His seminal work, 'Hind Swaraj', was originally written in Gujarati, reflecting his deep conviction that real empowerment begins with linguistic self-reliance.

Beyond individual success stories, there is strong economic evidence supporting mother-tongue education. Multiple studies have found that nations prioritising mother-tongue instruction had higher literacy rates, better workforce skill development, and stronger economic growth. In contrast, imposing a foreign language as the primary medium often led to higher dropout rates and weaker cognitive outcomes. When students are forced to learn complex subjects in a language they do not fully grasp, their confidence and engagement suffer, leading to poorer long-term academic and professional performance.

India's multilingual reality presents unique challenges, but the solution is not to replace regional languages with English; rather, it is to build a robust system that integrates mother tongues with multilingual proficiency. The way forward includes expanding regional language educational resources, training teachers in bilingual instruction, and encouraging higher education in Indian languages. With advancements in AI-driven translation tools and digital learning platforms, it is now possible to create high-quality textbooks, scientific literature, and research materials in multiple languages, ensuring that regional language education does not mean limited access to knowledge.

Learning in one's mother tongue is not just about education—it is about identity, clarity, and empowerment. When we think and express ourselves in our native language, we learn better, innovate faster, and connect deeper with our roots. A future built on the foundation of one's own language is a future of confidence, creativity, and cultural pride!

The author is the Group CEO of Techno India Group, a visionary and an educator. Beyond his corporate role, he is also a mentor who guides students towards resilience and self-discovery

Empowering India's workforce: The crucial role of upskilling and inclusive hiring

With evolving industry demands and a rising need for skilled labour, organisations must bridge skill gaps and create sustainable employment opportunities

In today's rapidly changing job market, skill development and inclusive hiring are more critical than ever, particularly for the blue-collar workforce. As industries evolve and the demand for skilled labour increases, organisations must focus on bridging skill gaps and creating pathways to meaningful employment.

By prioritising upskilling and inclusive hiring practices, companies can empower individuals, enhance service quality, and contribute to the overall growth of the economy.

Investing in Skill Development

Continuous learning is essential for the blue-collar workforce, where technological advancements and changing industry standards require a skilled and adaptable labour pool. According to a report by the Global Labor Market Conference (GLMC), 55 per cent of professionals feel their skills may become partially or fully obsolete within the next five years, prompting many to consider reskilling. Organisations are increasingly offering a variety of skill development programmes tailored specifically for their blue-collar employees. These programs encompass technical training, crisis management, digital security and leadership development, equipping workers with the expertise necessary for career advancement. In recent years, many companies have implemented structured upskilling initiatives that have led to significant improvements in service quality, efficiency and employee satisfaction.

Empowering the Grassroots Workforce

Blue-collar workers, who make up over 80 per cent of India's non-agricultural workforce, are essential to the country's economic growth across various sectors. According to McKinsey and Company, by 2030, 70 per cent of the 90 million new jobs expected in India will be blue-collar positions. These roles account for about 80 per cent of jobs in both the organised and unorganised sectors, acting as the primary engine of the economy. Their fulfilment is crucial for the growth of key sectors such as manufacturing and logistics. Recognising the unique challenges faced by grassroots workers, many organisations have developed targeted skilling initiatives that address the specific needs of this demographic.

These programs are designed to empower individuals at the community level, providing them with the tools and knowledge necessary to thrive in their roles. Through hands-on training and mentorship, companies are fostering a culture of skill enhancement that encourages employees to take ownership of their career paths.

Success Stories

Behind every blue-collar worker is a story of ambition and determination. Many individuals have experienced transformative career journeys through upskilling initiatives. For instance, frontline workers have advanced to supervisory roles after completing leadership training, while others have gained expertise in emerging technologies, securing higher-paying positions. However, a report by Worldindia reveals that more than 40 per cent of blue-collar workers are employed but actively seeking new job opportunities. The drive for better salaries, career growth, and personal motivations are leading factors. Concerns over layoffs and financial instability also prompt job searches.

Expanding Opportunities: Inclusive Hiring Practices

Organisations are not merely filling positions; they are creating futures. With a commitment to inclusive hiring, particularly in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities where job opportunities can be limited, companies are working to ensure that more individuals, regardless of gender or background, can build stable and rewarding careers. With an increasing focus on safety and a surge in residential and commercial complexes, the private security industry has become one of the biggest generators of jobs.

Women in the Workforce: Breaking Barriers

Empowering women in the workforce is a crucial aspect of inclusive hiring. More women are stepping into roles as individual contributors, frontline managers, and even executive leadership positions, demonstrating that gender is no barrier to success.

These initiatives foster a workplace culture where women can not only succeed but thrive.

The Road Ahead: Looking ahead, organisations are set to expand their upskilling programs to cater to India's growing middle class and evolving job market needs. By integrating technology-driven training and fostering a culture of continuous learning, companies aim to set new standards in workforce development. With strategic hiring approaches and robust skill enhancement initiatives, organisations are not just providing jobs; they are building careers and transforming lives. Investing in upskilling and creating employment opportunities is the grassroots level is not just a matter of social responsibility; it is also a key economic imperative.

(The writer is CEO SIS Ltd. Views are personal.)

DHIRAJ SINGH

UGC draft rules limit academic autonomy

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THE Ministry of Education and its many organisations are working overtime to reform education. These 'reforms' are the byproduct of the belief expounded in the NEP 2020 — that whatever exists is not appropriate and must be replaced (or at least re-named) with more centrally controllable procedures. Every day, a new document/draft of revamped guidelines or recommendations is issued. The latest UGC's draft for minimum qualification for recruitment and promotion of teachers and academic staff in colleges and universities is 'seeking' suggestions and feedback on the UGC portal.

The regulations on minimum qualifications for the recruitment and promotion of university and college teachers is a recipe for the collapse of quality of teaching-learning in higher education institutions. It is an inept effort to nitpick the existing procedures and further control the teaching community. The guidelines are riddled with obscurities, inconsistencies and indifference for the intricacies of academic life.

By prioritising research publications and patents over teaching and service, the regulations propagate a toxic ethic of academic exclusiveness, where faculty members are required to roll out run-of-the-mill research to mollify the supremacies that be rather than emphasise on providing worthwhile education to their learners.

The regulations' stress on 'Indian knowledge systems' is an oblique endeavour to enforce a constricted, nationalist pogrom on the academic world, stifling critical thinking and intellectual multiplicity. Wide-ranging expressions like 'recognised contributions' and 'Indian knowledge systems' are imprecise, making it problematic to decide what constitutes an effective contribution.

The lack of clear delineations gives way for misadventure, leaving scope for misapprehension, and allures indiscriminate decision-making and cross cronyism.

The draft regulation seeks to shift the focus from objectivity in selection to discretion and subjectivity. While the extant regulation requires the selection committee to assess a candidate for their research and publication, domain knowledge and presentation along with articulation, the proposed version requires the committee to base their decision on nine notable contributions. They include "innovative teaching contributions; research or teaching lab development; consultancy/sponsored research funding; teaching contributions in Indian languages; teaching-learning and research in Indian knowledge system; student internship/project supervision; digital content creation for MOOCs; community engagement and service; and startup".

The regulations prioritise research, patents and publications over teaching and service, potentially leading to an imbalance in academic responsibilities. It overlooks other valuable academic contributions like curriculum development and mentoring.

It has been also left to the selection committee's discretion to decide whether the research publications are in peer-reviewed journals, whether the chapters are in books published by reputed publishers and whether a candidate's contributions in the nine areas are notable.

The regulations do not provide adequate resources to support for faculty development, particularly for early-career researchers. The emphasis on research and publications assumes that faculty members already possess the necessary skills. This is a callous disregard for the well-being of academic staff, who are already overworked and underpaid.

The recruitment for the post of vice-chancellor includes persons with 10 years of experience at a senior level in industry, public administration, public policy and/or public sector undertakings and who have a proven track record of significant academic or scholarly contributions. The search-cum-selection committee would now be constituted by the visitor/chancellor. It shall include a nominee each of the visitor/chancellor; the UGC chairman and the apex authority of the university. The VC would also be appointed by the visitor/chancellor.

And, the regulations do not specify whether the chancellor decides with the aid and advice of the council of ministers. This is not only a poser for the federal structure of the republic but also an attempt to remote-control all educational institutions, regardless of education being a subject matter on the Concurrent List. Also, the states together outlay more money on education as against 2.5 per cent of GDP allocation by the union government in this year's Budget.

The centralisation of power and limitation of institutional autonomy are a reminder of the UGC's disdain for academic freedom and its determination to strangle the life out of universities. The regulations impose excessive bureaucratic controls, limiting institutional autonomy and flexibility.

The draft focuses on the one-size-fits-all approach and fails to account for diverse institutional contexts, needs and priorities. Higher education is on the Concurrent List, with both the Central and state governments vested with powers to legislate on education matters. The coordination and maintenance of standards are in the Union List, but the spirit of the Constitution is consultation and consensus rather than imposition.

Moreover, the regulations' tokenistic gestures towards multiplicity and inclusion are an affront to the very people they purport to oblige. The prerequisite for representation in selection committees is a muffled assurance, bereft of any meaningful binder to address the systemic disparities that have long beleaguered India's academe.

The importance on research publications and patents may short shrift applicants from marginalised communities who might not have had the same access to resources and opportunities. The obligation for representation in selection committees from SC/ST/OBC/minority/women/persons with disabilities categories is inadequate as it does not guarantee meaningful involvement or decision-making clout.

The regulations' silence on caste-based discrimination, sexual harassment and disability rights is resounding, pointing to UGC's reluctance in preserving the status quo.

The draft regulations are a poorly drafted, exceedingly doctrinaire and potentially prejudiced set of guidelines. They must be vetoed in their totality and be changed with a more nuanced, all-encompassing and representative framework that prioritises academic freedom, intellectual diversity and the well-being of students and faculty alike. A systematic amendment is essential to address these forebodings and craft a more inclusive, impartial and effective framework for higher education in India.

VITAL: A more inclusive, impartial and effective framework for higher education is needed.

> The draft regulations are a poorly drafted, exceedingly doctrinaire and potentially prejudiced set of guidelines. They must be vetoed in their totality.

Losing our tongue: The rise & fall of languages

The decline of some languages was probably expected by India's policymakers because the facilities provided for language education are mainly for those included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution

There was human habitation in India for thousands of years prior to the emergence of Sanskrit, and it is known that various languages existed, but we have no record of the languages that can help reconstruct the entire linguistic past. The earliest records of oral texts date to about 35 centuries before the present (BP), and the earliest records of writing date to 24 centuries BP.

While scripts had been in use in other parts of Asia, west of India for 50 centuries BP, why the Indian subcontinent took so long to get into lexical modes of expression has not yet been fully investigated. Undeciphered so far, the sign system of the Indus Valley civilisation makes any historical narrative of Indian languages incomplete and tentative. Writing originated in India some 24 centuries BP in the form of inscriptions and hand-written manuscripts. The writing culture was completely transformed when the paper came into use about 10 centuries BP, and it experienced another profound shift two centuries BP with the advent of printing of the first few Indian languages.

We still do not have conclusive knowledge of the remote ancient past of Tamil and several other indigenous languages in existence during the second millennium BC in the eastern parts of India. We know that at a somewhat uncertain point in time, during the phase of India's transformation from hunter-gatherer society to pastoral society, a branch of the remote-ancient Tamil spread to the north and another to the Northwest. Nevertheless, the precise timing remains unknown.

Finally, it is still a mystery as to when exactly the languages described in Genetic Linguistics as Isolates — the Nehali spoken in Maharashtra's Buldhana district, for instance — emerged locally or arrived in their present location. These are only some of the difficulties in presenting a clear historical picture of the origin, rise, and transformation of languages.

Over the last five millennia, roughly from the early Harappa times to our time, the subcontinent accepted language legacies as distinct as the Avestan of the Zoroastrians, the Austro-Asiatic of the Pacific, the Tibeto-Burman of the East and the Northeast Asia. The Indic (or the Indo-Aryan) languages in the Northern states, together with the Dravidic languages in the South and the Tibeto-Burman languages in the Northeast, each with a great variety of sub-branches — make for the larger bulk of the Indian languages.

Throughout the known history of the subcontinent, there has been an active exchange and cultural osmosis between the indigenous languages and the migratory languages, producing, in the process, great literature in many tongues. In the past, Pali, Sanskrit, and Persian acquired currency over the subcontinent's extensive geographical areas. Yet, the local languages — the Prakrits and Apabhramsas (in the case of Sanskrit) and desi-bhashas (in the case of Persian) — continued to thrive. Over time, they gained greater currency and, in various amalgamated forms, overshadowed the supra-languages. The intimate love-hate relationship between Indian languages and the English language over the last two centuries is developing precisely along the same trajectory.

However, this neat separation of a given language from its surrounding languages, in theory, does not accurately reflect the ground reality of the existing languages. In order to get a picture of that, one must look into the figures provided by the census. These figures show that the languages listed in the Eighth Schedule have a much larger number of speakers than those not included. The only exception to this is that of English. This increase is caused not only by the general population growth in different linguistic states but also by the decline of the languages not included in the Schedule. The decline is natural (and probably expected by the policymakers) because the facilities provided for language education are mainly for the languages included in the Eighth Schedule.

In the years to come, the other languages — mostly spoken by Adivasi communities and those belonging to the Austro-Asiatic family and the Tibeto-Burman family — may disappear altogether as a demographic indicator. That is to say that while the diction and the syntax patterns of these languages will no doubt survive, there may be a greater assimilation of these in the main languages of India. Whether this is desirable or not is a question that not only the cultural anthropologists but also all of us have to answer.

As for the main languages, the picture of their development is a mixed one. On the one hand, there is an unprecedented growth in the printed materials in these languages, and naturally so, given the multiplication of print capitalism and digital technology from the 19th century till now; on the other hand, the English language has come up as the major adversary to these languages. Many members of the class that, during the 19th century, advocated the cause of the major Indian languages have turned to English as a vehicle for their economic betterment. As such, there has been a sharp decline in the number of readers of literature in Indian languages in cities and semi-urban areas.

GN Devy

Throughout the known history of the subcontinent, there has been an active exchange and cultural osmosis between the indigenous languages and the migratory languages.
HT PHOTO

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A complicated milieu

NEP 2020 seeks to revolutionise India's education system through flexibility, skill development, and technology integration, but challenges in implementation, equity, faculty recruitment, and accreditation raise concerns about its effectiveness

RAJASHRI CHATTERJEE

The University Grants Commission is coming up with new recommendations frequently at present to revamp the educational landscape in India. Keeping in view the dynamic and competitive globalised state-of-affairs, a new education policy was absolutely needed for India. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 thus came up to revolutionise the educational milieu in the country with a slew of novel measures for various levels of education. The emphasis on multidisciplinary and holistic education and greater flexibility for the students along with continuous professional development of teachers is praiseworthy. However, there are several aspects that call for a relook considering all nooks and corners of the country which is so diversified from all respects. A detailed survey is necessary to understand the opportunities or concerns at every nook and corner before zeroing in to finalise a policy or a strategy.

According to Statista, there is a sharp mismatch between skillsets of the labour force and creation of jobs at present in our country. The dearth of jobs for fresh graduates is highlighted as a serious cause of concern. In this backdrop, a huge thrust on skill enhancement courses and holistic development of students under NEP is well appreciated. However, in the current semester system, juggling continuous formative assessments, several co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and internships does not appear to be easy for all, particularly for the underprivileged in different colleges. These underprivileged students are now seen getting engaged simultaneously in some jobs to meet their financial needs. Again, with more flexibility offered under the new system, as students become irregular at several instances, teachers struggle to impart the requisite knowledge or skills, continuously evaluate them through assignments, tests and projects and provide apt support to them in times of need. An important point to highlight here is that focus on certain privileged few or institutions of repute is inappropriate to gauge the overall scenario in the Indian context. Shortcomings are apparent at the fundamental or primary level of education. At present, the foundational education and discipline seem to have deteriorated much for a large section of the society, which is quite explicit at the higher educational level. Thus, more effective strategies and constructive endeavours are sought to address the aforementioned concerns.

The Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) framework for Undergraduate Programmes is replaced within a short span with the updated Curriculum & Credit (CCF) framework aligned to the NEP 2020 recommendations. It is doubtful whether all students are able to understand the new structure in entirety and the way ahead. Hence, a proper orientation on this framework is much needed at every institution before its execution. Further, whether everyone is well equipped to deal with the multiple entry/exit system (MEES) and other

Shortcomings are apparent at the fundamental or primary level of education

flexibilities or intricacies of the new structural arrangement is difficult to comprehend at present. The implementation of the new framework therefore seeks an enormous overhaul of the former systems and training individuals to deal with it correctly at every stage. Programmes strategised may be extremely arduous tasks to execute in the real scenarios. Additionally, there is a chance of the greater flexibility offered to students being misused by many.

In the backdrop of much emphasis given on outcome-based education and thereby on course outcomes and programme outcomes mapping, a uniformity in drafting the course outcomes and programme outcomes in all universities is required. When evaluative components are not mapped appropriately in certain universities and institutions under their aegis, any mapping essentially is not expected to be robust and uniform. Again, lack of proper training or orientation of teachers to deal with this delicate approach would make the exercise futile without fulfilment of the main objective. In this regard, a software focused on mapping with ease may be beneficial.

In the context of faculty recruitment, as policies with respect to eligibility criteria are revised often, it is essential to involve people from all academic domains, social strata, professional levels and research competence to draft a policy which is sustainable and fundamentally beneficial for our country. A sincere, value-driven mindset with a passion for teaching is also imperative along with academic and professional qualifications and competence.

Quality research activities are absolutely essential for the development of faculty members and therefore they should be motivated in a way to pursue the same on a continuous basis. Withdrawal of encouraging practices will hinder their development and worsen the country's educational setting. The UGC-CARE system of listing quality journals introduced in 2018 is now scrapped to transition towards a decentralised approach in which respective higher education institutions would play a bigger role in identifying appropriate journals for publications to maintain their repute in the academic community. Recently, Niti Aayog has underscored that the state public universities, which enrol over 80 per cent of India's higher education students, are grappling with severe faculty shortages and dated infrastructural facilities which are significantly impacting academic and research outcomes. Yet, again, the future scenario in this regard seems quite obscure with a haze.

During the last few years, there has been an enormous thrust on entrepreneurship and startups. It was needed for India to address the concern of employability. But again, entrepreneurship is about passion, networking, creativity, innovation and funding. This is not everyone's cup of tea. Pursuing a mandatory course on entrepreneurship in a programme or drafting an entrepreneurial project or participating in events focused on this topic may not help the students in this regard. More productive support and efforts are needed from all corners concerned with increasing business and enhancing employability.

NEP 2020 aims to leverage technology substantially to improve the teaching-learning framework. Nonetheless, excessive use of technology among students is leading to a sedentary lifestyle, health hazards, Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), loss of creativity and innovation, cyberbullying and many more. Moreover, when a large section of the country comprises underprivileged students, it is not easy to inculcate the right use of technology among them, and as long as it cannot be done, the outcome may be disastrous for many. Recently, Sweden, a highly developed country, has taken a call to reduce excessive reliance on digital learning and transition back to traditional printed textbooks to a large extent perceiving the demerits of digital-first approach in hindering development of fundamental skills of reading and writing among students.

To wrap up, zooming in on the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) accreditation procedure, much hue and cry has been witnessed for long pertaining to unethical practices resorted to by many. Subpar institutions have been seen receiving better grades than their more competent peers, and therefore, it is claimed that many loopholes and lacunae are inbuilt in the system, demanding enormous attention from the competent authorities. Recently, concerns have been aggravated by bribery cases exposed in connection with the grades awarded to certain institutions. Thus, several institutions that are in the middle of the accreditation process at present find themselves in a dilemma about their future grading. The authorities have asserted a quick overhaul and indicated that physical inspections might soon be discontinued. However, I am still sceptical about whether this hasty decision to implement a new process will effectively address the severity of the concern. If the new system is devoid of physical inspections, would AI-generated tools be sufficient to screen documents, systems, processes, and outcomes effectively to ensure justice for all? Once again, only time will tell.

The writer is Assistant Professor (Commerce), Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya. Views expressed are personal

Beyond academics: How study abroad shapes personal growth and leadership skills

In an increasingly interconnected world, the decision to study abroad is no longer just about acquiring a degree. It is a transformative journey, one that shapes individuals

Studying abroad allows students to see the world through a different lens. By engaging with global issues firsthand, be it climate change, social justice, or economic policies, they gain a deeper understanding of how interconnected and interdependent our world truly is. This global perspective is invaluable in shaping informed leaders. It instils a sense of responsibility and encourages students to think beyond their immediate surroundings.

Leaders who understand global challenges and can approach them with a holistic mindset are better equipped to create meaningful change.

Collaboration and Networks
Studying abroad offers unique opportunities to build a global network of peers, professors, and professionals. These connections often serve as invaluable resources, providing insights, guidance, and opportunities long after graduation. Collaborating with people from different parts of the world teaches students how to harness diverse strengths and ideas to achieve common goals. They become adept at creating inclusive environments where everyone feels valued—a critical skill for leaders in today's multicultural workplaces.

Growth in Emotional Intelligence
Living away from home is an unfamiliar setting often stirs a range of emotions. These emotional highs and lows contribute significantly to the

DALJEET SANDHU

development of emotional intelligence. Students learn to manage their emotions, empathise with others, and build meaningful relationships despite cultural differences. Emotional intelligence, often considered more critical than IQ in leadership roles, is cultivated naturally during the study-abroad experience. Moreover, going through relationships in a foreign setting teaches students how to build trust and support, even in challenging circumstances.

Communication and Interpersonal Skills
Effective communication is a cornerstone of leadership, and studying abroad is an excellent training ground for this skill.

Navigating a foreign environment requires students to communicate with clarity and intent, often across language barriers. They become adept at listening, interpreting non-verbal cues, and tailoring their messages to suit diverse audiences. Furthermore, participating in group projects, extracurricular activities, or even casual social interactions with peers from different cultural contexts enhances interpersonal skills. Students learn to collaborate, resolve conflicts, and inspire those around them, qualities that define great leaders.

Building Resilience and Independence
Moving to a new country requires immense courage. From finding accommodation to dealing with administrative paperwork, students often have to manage tasks that they may have never encountered before. The absence of a familiar support system forces them to rely on their abilities, building resilience and self-reliance. Moreover, students gain confidence as they navigate and overcome these hurdles. This newfound sense of independence not only shapes their identity but also prepares them for leadership roles where decisiveness and self-assurance are paramount.

Embracing Cultural Diversity
One of the most profound aspects of studying abroad is exposure to cultural diversity. Students find themselves immersed in a society that often operates on different values, customs, and traditions than their own. This immersion fosters adaptability and open-mindedness, as they learn to respect and appreciate perspectives vastly different from their own. Engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds teaches valuable lessons in empathy and cross-cultural communication.

Whether it's understanding the nuances of a local festival, navigating a new language, or simply sharing a meal with someone from another culture, these experiences challenge preconceived notions and build cultural intelligence. In short, studying abroad is much more than an academic pursuit; it is a journey of self-discovery and transformation.

By embracing cultural diversity, building resilience, and developing critical leadership skills, students emerge as well-rounded individuals ready to tackle the challenges of a globalised world. The lessons learned during this time extend far beyond the classroom.

They shape character, nurture empathy, and inspire vision—qualities that define true leaders. For those who take the plunge, studying abroad is not just an investment in their education but also a stepping stone toward becoming agents of change in an ever-evolving world. For students who choose to study abroad, the richness comes not just in knowledge but in the experiences that would have into future horizons.

(The writer is CEO of India AI Portal, views are personal)

Who'll Speak For English?

GOI and Tamil Nadu are taking up the wrong language cause. They should put students before politics

Everything changes, nothing changes. Half a century ago, the Centre and Chennai were at loggerheads over the three-language policy. They are at it again. Morarji Desai and Annadurai are long gone, but those same roles are being essayed by Dharmendra Pradhan and Stalin. GOI is still saying Tamil Nadu must come to terms with the Constitution, Tamil Nadu is still saying GOI mustn't do Hindi imposition. One thing they are on the same page on? High decibel politics. Never mind that confrontational posturing does little for students in whose name it's being done.

There's always been a broad sentiment in TN that forcing Hindi upon its students would both be an unnecessary burden and a cultural 'assault'. Against this backdrop, the Centre withholding Tamil Nadu's central share of Samagra Shiksha funds until it falls in line on the language issue, is untenable. First, because it disrespects federalism. But even more importantly, because educational outcomes alone should be the yardstick in such matters. On this front, the latest Aser report reveals 36% of Class 5 govt school students in Tamil Nadu can read a Class 2-level text, and 21% can do division. This compares to 49% and 31% at the nationwide level, respectively. Obviously the state is underperforming relative to its wealth. But non-release of central funds isn't the solution.

Meanwhile, with one side standing for Hindi and the other for Tamil, who will stand for English? Parents scrounging to send their children to 'English-medium' schools tells the critical truth about aspirations across India. This is also where we have some advantage over peer countries. But they aren't sitting idle about it. In Philippines, for example, there's a proposal to ban Filipino dubbing of English-language films and TV shows to improve English proficiency. If India's political class is sincerely concerned for students, it should take up the cause of English.

भाषाई विविधता मिटने का खतरा

भाषाई और सांस्कृतिक विविधता के अंतरराष्ट्रीय उत्सव के रूप में इस बार का मातृभाषा दिवस यूनेस्को का रजत जयंती वर्ष है। इसके पीछे टिकाऊ समाज के निर्माण के लिए विभिन्न भाषाओं के संरक्षण, सहनशीलता और पारस्परिक आदर का संकल्प लिया गया है। अपनी और दूसरों की भाषा को समझना अपनी और दूसरों की संस्कृति को जानने-समझने का मुख्य माध्यम है। भाषा न रहे तो हम अपनी संस्कृति को अगली पीढ़ी तक ठीक से पहुंचाने में चूक जाएंगे। ऐसे में आज विश्व में प्रचलित विभिन्न भाषाओं को सुरक्षित और संवर्धित करना हमारा विशेष दायित्व है। एक विरल नैसर्गिक शक्ति के रूप में भाषा हमें न केवल ज्ञान-सृजन का अवसर देती है, बल्कि उस ज्ञान को संजोने और दूसरों से साझा करना भी संभव बनाती है। प्रकृति भी इसे समर्थन देती है। नवजात शिशु की श्रवण शक्ति अद्भुत होती है। वह स्वाभाविक ध्वनि और शोर में फर्क करने लगता है। छह माह होने के पहले ही बच्चे कई भाषाएं सुनते और समझते रहते हैं। तीन वर्ष की आयु में उनका तीन चार भाषाओं से परिचय होता है। दस वर्ष तक यह प्रक्रिया तेजी से चलती है। भारत के बहुभाषिक परिवेश में आगे बढ़ते हैं।

भाषा के सहारे ही हम व्यवहार करते हैं, सोचते हैं, कल्पना करते हैं और उस कल्पना को मूर्त आकार भी देते हैं। आज भारत में लगभग आठ सौ भाषाएं दर्ज हैं। बहुतेरे भारतीय कई भाषाएं बोलते हैं। यह बहुभाषिकता विभिन्न भाषाई समुदायों के बीच न केवल संचार को प्रभावी बनाती है, बल्कि साझा पहचान को सबल करती है। बावजूद इसके विभिन्न भाषाएं अलग-अलग लिपियों का उपयोग करती हैं। इनमें से कई लिपियां एक ही मूल की हैं, जैसे ब्राह्मी लिपि। भाषाओं की बहुलता समृद्धि का स्रोत है, जो हजारों वर्षों के प्रवास, परस्पर क्रिया और विभिन्न समूहों के बीच एकीकरण से पली-बढ़ी है। भाषिक विविधता की दृष्टि से भारत आज विश्व में दूसरे नंबर पर है। भारत के संविधान की वर्तमान व्यवस्था में 22 मुख्य भाषाएं तथा छह क्लासिकल भाषाएं (तमिल, संस्कृत, कन्नड़, तेलुगु, मलयालम और उड़िया) सम्मिलित हैं। देवनागरी में लिखी जाने वाली हिंदी

एआइ के दौर में हमें यह ध्यान रखना होगा कि मातृभाषा अस्मिता और संस्कृति को गढ़ने का कार्य करती है

गिरीश्वर मिश्र

संस्कृति का संवहन भी करती है मातृभाषा● फाइल

अधिकारिक रूप से राजभाषा है। हालांकि इसके भी अनेक रूप हैं। संविधान में यह विशेष प्रविधान है कि अल्पसंख्यक समुदाय अपनी भाषा लिपि और संस्कृति सुरक्षित रख सकेंगे। इस सबके बीच हमें यह भी स्मरण करना होगा कि मातृभाषा अस्मिता और संस्कृति को गढ़ने का कार्य करती है। इसी दृष्टि से नई शिक्षा नीति में बहुभाषिकता, लुप्तप्राय भाषाओं का संरक्षण और स्थानीय भाषा में समावेशी शिक्षा जैसे सरोकारों पर खास जोर दिया जा रहा है। हालांकि औपनिवेशिक विरासत के तहत अंग्रेजी के वर्चस्व का सामाजिक जीवन पर विभाजनकारी असर रहा है। इसने भाषाई हीनता को भी जन्म दिया। हिंदी या अन्य भारतीय भाषाएं जब घर की भाषा हैं, तब शिक्षा में अंग्रेजी माध्यम कई जटिलताएं पैदा कर रहा है। मौलिक सोच और सृजनात्मकता में ऐसे विद्यार्थी पिछड़ रहे हैं। शोध और अनुसंधान की दृष्टि से यह परोपजीवी भाषाई संस्कार घातक सिद्ध हो रहा है।

आज वैश्वीकरण तथा कृत्रिम बुद्धिमत्ता यानी एआइ की बढ़त से तमाम चुनौतियां खड़ी हो रही हैं। भविष्य का नजरिया कुछ ऐसा होने जा रहा है कि लोग विभिन्न गैजेटों की सहायता से वह सब कुछ देखेंगे, सुनेंगे और बात करेंगे, जो वैश्विक केंद्र द्वारा मुहैया कराया जाएगा। कुछ सलाह की जरूरत हुई तो बच्चे अब माता-पिता की जगह एलेक्सा या सीरी से पूछेंगे। उनके माता-पिता भी रोबोट से पूछेंगे। भाषा और संचार की प्रौद्योगिकी के क्षेत्र में माइक्रोसाफ्ट और गूगल जैसे कई दिग्गज किरदार दुनिया की विविधता को मिटाने का भी काम कर रहे हैं। इसके चलते बच्चे की सृजनात्मक क्षमता, अध्यापकों की श्रेष्ठता आदि सब दांव पर है। इस मनुष्यतविहीन तकनीक में कोई सामान्य बुद्धि या कामनसेंस नहीं होता। उसे मानवीय भावनाओं की भी कोई समझ नहीं होती और न ही गलतियों को सुधारने की गुंजाइश होती है। वस्तुतः उसमें कोई अपवाद संभव ही नहीं होता। मनुष्य की तरह यह सचेतन और संवेदनशील भी नहीं है। इस तकनीक को बहुलता की कोई समझ भी नहीं होती। इसके साथ ही उसमें घटनाओं और परिस्थितियों के संदर्भ को ग्रहण करने सुविधा नहीं होती।

वस्तुतः कृत्रिम बुद्धि मानव सभ्यता की अगली गुत्थी बन रही है। यह भरोसा किया जा रहा है कि सारा का सारा ज्ञान मानव मस्तिष्क के बाहर डाटा के रूप में भंडारित किया जा सकता है। ऐसे में प्रश्न उठेगा कि मनुष्य की जरूरत ही क्या है? मनुष्य को विस्थापित कर जीवन का अर्थ पाना असंभव है। गनीमत है कि मानव मस्तिष्क स्वयं को खुद संचालित और नियमित करता है। इस तकनीक को धारण करने वाले मनुष्य को मनुष्य बना रहना होगा और ऐसा करने में भाषा-साहित्य की इसमें अहम भूमिका होगी। भाषा सिर्फ विचारों को प्रकट करने का तरीका भर नहीं होती है। वह संस्कृति का संवहन भी करती है। ऐसे में स्कूली व्यवस्था को भाषाओं और संस्कृतियों के संरक्षण में विकसित किया जाना चाहिए। 21वीं सदी के भारत में बहुभाषिकता एक विशिष्टता है। आज आवश्यकता है कि फौरी राजनीतिक हित-अहित को किनारे रख भारत के भविष्य को सुरक्षित करते हुए संतुलित भाषा नीति का कार्यान्वयन किया जाए। भाषा हमारे अस्तित्व का साधन भी है और साध्य भी।

Why is three-language policy controversial?

Why has the Centre withheld funds to Tamil Nadu under the Samagra Shiksha programme? When did the State adopt a two-language policy? What is its stand on mandatory imposition of Hindi? What is the central government's view? How can the issue be resolved?

D. Suresh Kumar

The story so far:

The Union Government has withheld ₹2,152 crore in funds due to Tamil Nadu under the Samagra Shiksha scheme for refusing to join the Prime Minister Schools for Rising India (PMSHRI) initiative. While T.N. is eager to participate in the PM SHRI scheme, it staunchly opposes the accompanying mandate to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. One of the State's core objections to the NEP is its insistence on adopting a three-language formula in schools. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has rejected any concessions, insisting that T.N. must align "with the Constitution". Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, questioning which provision of the Constitution justifies such mandates, has declared that the State will not submit to "blackmail" or abandon its historically adopted two-language policy.

What does the NEP 2020 state?

The NEP 2020 has retained the three-language formula, a concept first introduced in the NEP of 1968. The key difference, however, is that back then the NEP advocated for Hindi to be a compulsory language across the nation.

Tamil Nadu, with its long-standing two-language policy, has consistently outperformed many other States in key education metrics

Hindi-speaking States were required to teach Hindi, English, and a modern Indian language – preferably a south Indian language – while non-Hindi speaking States were expected to teach the local regional language, Hindi, and English. In contrast, NEP 2020 offers greater flexibility, technically not imposing any specific language on any State. It states that "the three languages learned by children will be the choices of States, regions, and, of course, the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India." This means, in addition to the State's language, children would be required to learn at least one other Indian language – not necessarily Hindi. The policy also emphasises bilingual teaching, particularly in the home language/mother tongue and English. Conspicuously, it places significant emphasis on Sanskrit as an optional choice within the three-language formula.

Why is there opposition to this policy in T.N.?

Tamil Nadu has long resisted the 'imposition of Hindi'. In 1937, when the C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) government in Madras proposed making Hindi a compulsory subject in secondary schools, the Justice Party fiercely opposed it. Two young men, Thalamuthu and Natarajan, who participated in the agitation, died and became icons in the anti-Hindi imposition movement. Rajaji eventually resigned, and the British government withdrew the order. In 1965, as the deadline for adopting Hindi as the sole official language across India approached, the State witnessed violent protests that led to the deaths of at least 70 people in police shootings or self-immolations. The agitation resurfaced when Parliament adopted the Official Languages (Amendment) Act, 1967, and the Official Language Resolution, 1968, which mandated the teaching of Hindi as part of the three-language formula. In January 1968, the Madras Assembly, led by the C.N. Annadurai-led first Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government, adopted a resolution calling for the scrapping of the three-language formula and the elimination of Hindi from the curriculum in T.N. schools. Since then, the State has steadfastly followed its two-language policy teaching Tamil and English.

Major political parties, including the ruling DMK and the principal opposition All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have consistently opposed any efforts to alter this policy. In 2019, backlash led the Kasturirangan Committee to remove the mandatory Hindi learning clause from the draft NEP.

Why is the three-language policy seen as an attempt to impose Hindi?

Political parties and activists in T.N. view the three-language policy as a "smokescreen" and a "backdoor" attempt to impose Hindi. They argue that, in practice, the implementation of a three-language scheme would inevitably lead to the teaching of Hindi, given the limited resources for providing additional language teachers and learning materials. Moreover, the Union Government and prominent BJP leaders have periodically advocated for the promotion of Hindi. In 2019, the Union Budget allocated ₹50 crore to support the appointment of Hindi teachers in non-Hindi speaking States. Critics contend the Centre's actions do not match its rhetoric on promoting regional languages, as evidenced by the lack of efforts to hire adequate regional language teachers in Kendriya Vidyalayas or to ensure south Indian languages are taught in schools above the Vindhyas.

Mr. Pradhan has defended the withholding of funds to T.N., making it clear that adherence to the three-language policy is non-negotiable. He urged Mr. Stalin to "rise above political differences" and criticised the State for viewing the NEP 2020 with a "myopic vision". In response, Mr. Stalin has accused Mr. Pradhan of attempting to "impose Hindi" under the guise of the NEP's policy. Mr. Stalin has vowed that, as long as the DMK and he are around, Tamil and T.N.'s interests will not be compromised.

What is the way forward?

The only viable solution lies in constructive dialogue and a practical compromise between the Centre and the State on an issue like education, which was transferred from the State to the concurrent list during the Emergency. Notably, T.N., with its long-standing two-language policy, has consistently outperformed many other States in key metrics such as Gross Enrolment Ratio and reduced school dropout rates. Disagreements over teaching a third language should not be allowed to derail funding for Samagra Shiksha, a comprehensive programme for education.

Not backing down: Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin and his allies protest against NEP's three-language policy in Chennai on February 18. R. RAGU

KIIT suicide row: How 'othering' in university spaces impacts students

BY INVITATION

RITUPARNA PATGIRI

Universities are often heralded as liberal and progressive spaces which promote ideas of equality and social justice. But they do not exist in isolation, and are representative of the society that we live in. The recent death of a Nepali student at the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Bhubaneswar, Odisha has once again highlighted how universities are microcosms of existing social hierarchies in society. A 20-year-old student from Nepal was found dead in her hostel room last week. While the reasons for her death are still unclear, it has been alleged that she was harassed by a male student from the same institute. Reports speculate that the male student was the deceased student's ex-boyfriend who physically and verbally abused her.

According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), 378 cases of sexual harassment were reported in universities from April 2022 to March 2023. This does not include other kinds of harassment. One can only imagine the magnitude of other forms of harassment and the unreported cases of sexual harassment that happen within these campuses.

The KIIT case is a reflection of how women continue to remain vulnerabl, and are regularly discriminated against on educational campuses. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) by the union education ministry, women are outnumbered by men in engineering and technology programmes, especially in private universities. This is true for both students and faculty. As such, there is a greater need for protection of women's rights in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), especially in private universities. According to UGC rules, HEIs are required to have policies to prevent sexual harassment and committees to combat violence against women. But filing complaints still remains a daunting task for the affected women as they are often judged and shamed for what they go through. This could also have been true for the KIIT case.

Apart from gendered differences, universities also become spaces in which other processes of marginalisation operate. Suicide cases linked to casteist and racist practices have rocked several campuses of the Indian Institute of Technologies, national law universities as well as central universities. In the KIIT incident as well, one can see how Nepali students were othered in the aftermath of the suicide. In response to protests by students from the Nepali community, the university asked them to vacate the campus premises and were subjected to derogatory remarks made against Nepal. Some staff members drew comparisons between India and Nepal's budgets. Eventually, widespread backlash made the university suspend some of its staff members as well as withdraw the decision to evict the protesting students. Apologies for the offensive comments have also been rendered. Some of the staff as well as the suspected ex-boyfriend have been arrested.

FAILING THE TEST: Private institutions should set up special cells to raise awareness and tackle discrimination

The Odisha govt has assured that a thorough investigation would be conducted in response to the Nepal govt's demands for an impartial investigation. Arrangements have also been made for the safety and security as well as the protection of academic interests of the Nepali students. The fact-finding committee set up by the Odisha govt has also been asked to probe why the state govt was not informed about KIIT's treatment of its students.

The KIIT incident has set off a diplomatic row but such incidents have become common in HEIs. The bias that exists against the Nepali community is unmistakable with remarks measuring the protesting students and the deceased student's worth against their country's budget. Such projections stem from how Nepalis are perceived in society. The term kancha — often used to describe a Nepali person— is used to mean a worker who does manual labour.

It's similar to how terms like Nigerian and chinky, Chinese, etc. are used to derogate Africans and north-east Indians respectively. Students from these communities too have faced racism, not just in university campuses but also in residential spaces. While universities still provide some kind of institutional support in situations of discrimination, in other spaces like housing colonies racism is rampant. As such, when the universities display a lack of accountability and institutional support, it becomes even more difficult for students who are migrants from faraway places.

In many colleges and universities such as the University of Delhi, there are now special cells for students from north-east India. There are also special cells like women development cells in many public HEIs, which play a significant role in raising awareness against socially harmful practices such as racism and gender-based discrimination. Such initiatives should also become part of private universities as well as other technical and law institutes. There is also a need to focus on building similar special cells for foreign students. These can become spaces for them to raise their issues and concerns. Unless the special needs of marginalised sections are well taken care of, universities cannot really call themselves inclusive. And such cases of othering will continue to make headlines. ∎

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Amit Kundal

Today's superpower

Attention to detail allows students to dig deeper, find patterns, and draw connections between different aspects of their lives.

Who would have thought attention would start becoming a rare resource? Amid the chaos of juggling multiple tasks, the ability to pay attention to details stands out as a superpower, and a rather subtle one at that. How attention to detail can transform and transcend our creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills often goes overlooked. This, unknowingly, has a direct impact on our daily experiences.

In a world where rapid results are all the rage, the magic lies in taking a pause to deliberately observe, listen, and truly engage with the world around us. It isn't just an aesthetic exercise but rather a mindset that tends to shape how humans, especially students, navigate their lives through their education and careers.

Perception and Interpretation

At its core, attention to detail begins with how we perceive and interpret the world through our senses. Learning to truly perceive and pay attention is not about passivity.

It is about actively engaging with the nuances of our environment and its complexities and allowing it to inform your creative and intellectual pursuits. That means not just observing the world but also participating in it. The way you look at an everyday object, interact with a space, or observe human behaviour can become the seed of inspiration for something transformative.

Design is everywhere, and we are in it. Every type of design exists to create value and profoundly meaningful human experiences. From the shape of our coffee mugs, thoughtfully designed to cater to our ergonomic needs, to solving the convoluted issue of climate calamities through well-crafted strategies, design always surrounds us and becomes an organic part of our environment. This is why paying attention to detail has substantial implications.

Take a good look at your phone screen and imagine if the 'home' button had been placed on the top left corner. Would it be more convenient than its original position?

Attention to such details bridges the gap between functionality and delight, between an acceptable outcome and an extraordinary one.

Students who cultivate and embrace this mindset of leveraging attention often find themselves creating work that resonates deeply, whether it is designing immersive interfaces, crafting compelling narratives, or solving complex global issues. The ripple effect of paying attention can lead to outcomes that are not only functional but also meaningful.

Curating experiences

Have you noticed the apparent fragrance when you walk into a Starbucks? Or the warm welcoming lighting that draws you in to enjoy a cup of coffee? If these details weren't part of a customer's experience, the chances of going back there would be slimmer. Elements in the environment that are otherwise thought of as dispensable actually make or break our experience. Today, it has become the designer's role to curate these experiences. Needless to say, being able to consciously and creatively integrate these details results in a memorable experience.

In today's interconnected world, technological and human experiences are mingling in ways that demand the invaluable ability to notice, interpret, and act on the details. Future designers, innovators, and thinkers must nurture this skill to navigate the intricate relationship between people and new-age tech especially as it becomes increasingly complex. A design education grounded in interdisciplinary learning that combines Technology, Psychology, Business Analytics, and the Humanities can equip students with the capabilities to balance technical precision with humanity-centric empathy, fostering a mindset where every detail contributes to a larger, purpose-driven vision.

With a growing focus on improving human and user experiences, the need for impactful experience design has become paramount. Experience design as a field takes a holistic approach that effectively merges aesthetics with empathy and fosters innovation across sectors. It is a creative process of shaping meaningful products, services, and business frameworks, embracing tangible and virtual interactions alike.

For students stepping in to tomorrow's dynamic world, attention to detail is a superpower that allows people to dig deeper, find patterns and draw connections between different aspects of their lives.

Ultimately, it is a simple, yet effective weapon to achieve more mindful outcomes that have an invaluable positive impact on the world around us.

The writer is Associate Dean, Faculty of Design, Art and Performance, FLAME University.

Indian industry needs innovation, not mindless toil

Jayan Jose Thomas

is a Professor of Economics at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi

A few months ago, this writer and his colleagues interviewed migrant industrial workers in Ludhiana, Punjab, for a research project. The respondents worked in factories (producing garments, auto components, and other products) for 11 hours to 12 hours a day. When orders were high, they worked for days on end without a break. Away from the shop floor, their waking hours were spent almost entirely on cooking and in their daily commute.

It is puzzling that some of the well-known corporate leaders in the country have been urging Indians to work longer hours. They may not be aware that most of India's workers are informal and must work extremely long hours, sweating to earn a living (manual workers or household helpers). In 2023-24, the Periodic Labour Force Survey showed that only 21.7% of India's workers were in regular jobs with a salary, while the rest were casual workers or self-employed. Even within the category of regular workers, approximately half of them had to face informal working conditions (they did not have a written job contract, were not eligible for paid leave, and did not receive any social security benefit).

Competing with the cheap labour advantage

By publicly expressing their preference for having longer working hours, industry bosses have inadvertently confirmed a well-known, yet not-much-discussed, fact. Indian industry continues to derive its competitive advantage mainly from cheap labour rather than technology and innovation. In the developed world, the mode of surplus extraction underwent a transformation long ago, from making workers labour longer hours to employing them more efficiently with superior technologies and management practices. Based on workers' conditions during the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the 18th century, Marx wrote: "In its ...werewolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working day. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It huggles over a meal-time...."

However, working conditions in Britain improved by the middle of the 19th century, following regulations brought about by labour union pressures and the sweeping economic and technological changes (although exploitative labour practices continued unabatedly in the colonies). Today, workers in rich countries put in much fewer hours but have significantly higher productivity than those in developing countries.

With an over-reliance on cheap labour for growth, captains of the Indian industry have been shooting themselves in the foot.

According to data reported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2024, an employee's average weekly work hours was 38 hours in the United States and 36.6 hours in Japan as compared to 46.7 hours in India.

India's capitalists have deployed one strategy after another to ensure that they have at their disposal a large labour force willing to work long hours for low wages. Big businesses in India have abetted a structural shift in industry from the organised sector, which is governed by regulations of wages and working conditions, to the unorganised sector, where such rules do not apply. In industrial clusters across the country, there is a predominance of small units with six or less workers. At any time in a crowded industrial area in Coimbatore or Ludhiana, one hears the sounds of several hundreds of machines (lathes, milling and rolling machines, foundries) operating in small sheds. Each shed produces a small part or a component that feeds into a production network coordinated by more prominent firms to manufacture a range of products, including pumps, automobiles, and agricultural tools. In most small firms, the owners, often former workers, work alongside the hired labourers. Over 70% of India's manufacturing workforce (68 million in 2021-22) are in small, unregistered enterprises (each with less than 10 workers).

Losing out on innovation

The relations between the small and large firms in India have not been mutually enriching (of the kind that prospered in Japan), but instead, have been enfeebling the small firms even more. In interviews this writer had with them over the years, the owners of small firms highlighted issues relating to payments for the parts or components they supply. The bigger firms typically delay these payments several months after receiving the supply, leaving the small-firm owners desperate for fresh funds to run their factories. The big firms refuse to pay more for the parts despite increases in material and other production-related costs, encouraging a race-to-the-bottom competition among the small firms. All these are at a time when small firms are weakened by inadequate state support, especially bank credit, and rising competition from cheaper imports.

India's factories are increasingly dependent on workers who are employed through contractors rather than those they directly employ. Of all workers who joined India's factory sector after 2011-12, 56% are contract workers. These workers, who are not protected by labour regulations, are paid much lower wages than directly employed workers. Workers who migrate from their villages to seek jobs in distant lands form the core of the labour supply for Indian industry.

The low wages migrant workers receive manifest their multiple disadvantages – on account of their social position and their lack of ownership of assets or access to social security benefits. As wages have been pushed downward, profits have soared, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In India's factory sector, profit as a share of value added was 31.6% in 2019-20, but shot upward to 46.4% in 2021-22.

The garment industry

However, with its over-reliance on cheap labour for growth, the Indian industry has been shooting itself in the foot, hindering its forward movement in the long run, especially globally. A case in point is India's garment industry experience. One expects a labour-surplus India to outshine other countries in this low-wage industry. However, India's share of the worldwide export of garments has remained stagnant at 3.1% over the last two decades. China, Bangladesh, and Vietnam have considerably outperformed India in the garment industry. Chinju Johny and this writer (*Economic and Political Weekly*, August 24, 2024) have argued that the main barrier to progress for India in this industry is the reluctance shown by the capitalists to modernise firms. They lack the ambition to go beyond the limited advantages that low wages offer them in the domestic and niche segments of the export markets in the garment industry, which western multinational companies dominate.

The easy availability of labour has lulled Indian industry into a stupor, closing its eyes to the wider opportunities and the gaping need for technological and managerial changes. This has undermined growth in all fields, including new-generation ones such as the IT sector. Low wages and long working hours have reduced the purchasing capabilities of the working classes and depressed the domestic market, reinforcing the negative momentum.

Stretching the limits of the working day, allowing little time for recuperation for tired minds and bodies, and having all these driven by the greed for profits, is unconscionable. And the industry's gains, if any, are only in the short run. In the long run, the swelling ranks of impoverished workers will strangle the industry, leaving it gasping for innovation and growth. The earlier the masters of the Indian industry realise this, the better.

Why has the UGC-CARE list of journals been discontinued?

What are the suggestive parameters introduced by the University Grants Commission with respect to academic journals? Will it lead to a proliferation of low quality journals?

A. M. Jigeesh

The story so far:

The University Grants Commission (UGC) decided to discontinue the UGC Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (UGC-CARE) list, which is a list of quality academic journals, first introduced in 2018. The UGC-CARE list will now be replaced by a set of suggestive parameters for choosing journals based on eight criteria. Stakeholders can submit suggestions by February 25.

What do the new parameters say?

There are about 36 suggestive parameters under eight criteria in the draft notification titled "Suggestive Parameters for Peer-Reviewed Journals." Under the journal preliminary criteria, the UGC has asked teachers to note the journal title,

the international standard serial number, periodicity and continuity and transparency review policy etc before sending an article for publication. Under the editorial board criteria, the UGC wants authors to ensure that the journal's editorial board details and editorial board composition are made available. Similarly other criteria under suggestive parameters include journal editorial policy, journal standards, journal visibility and research ethics.

Why did the UGC withdraw it?

The aim of the UGC-CARE listing was to ensure that only "reputable" journals are recognised for faculty selections, promotions, and research funding applications. According to UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar, the UGC-CARE list faced several criticisms, including over-centralisation in deciding what

constitutes high-quality research and journals, and unnecessary delays in including or excluding journals from the list. Academics had also raised concerns that in certain fields, such as Tamil, the availability of research journals were limited as per the UGC CARE list. Mr. Kumar said there was lack of transparency in the decision-making process and highly respected journals published in Indian languages were excluded from the list.

Furthermore, the UGC claims that the new approach will help in combating predatory journals and decentralise the mechanism of choosing academic journals. Higher education institutions will "now be responsible for establishing credible mechanisms to evaluate journals and ensure they meet high ethical and scholarly standards." They can develop their own institutional mechanisms for

evaluating the quality of publications and journals. "These mechanisms should align with established academic norms and indicative parameters suggested by the UGC. This decentralised approach allows HEIs to tailor their evaluation processes to suit their specific needs," Mr. Kumar said in a statement. Institutions can now create evaluation models that consider the unique characteristics of different disciplines, and accommodate newer, evolving fields.

What has been the response?

Students and academics have voiced their concerns on the latest move. Their main worry is that the decision will result in the mushrooming of low-quality journals. The Central Executive Committee of the Students' Federation of India (SFI) condemned the UGC's move, which they said was taken without adequate consultation with student and research communities. The SFI termed the decision as a serious setback to academic integrity and quality research in India. The SFI added that the UGC's decision is part of a broader pattern of deregulation in higher education under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. "While decentralisation is essential for academic freedom, the lack of a central oversight mechanism could lead to arbitrary and inconsistent journal evaluation processes across institutions," it said.

THE GIST

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The aim of the UGC-CARE listing was to ensure that only "reputable" journals are recognised for faculty selections, promotions, and research funding applications.

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According to UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar, the UGC-CARE list faced several criticisms, including over-centralisation in deciding what constitutes high-quality research and journals, and unnecessary delays in including or excluding journals from the list.

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Students and academics have voiced their concerns on the latest move.

In campus deaths, a warning

Residential education can be empowering, but its risks need hard reckoning

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

Of all the outraged comments that have exploded across media following last week's tragedy of a student suicide and protests by Nepali students at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) in Odisha, this one on Facebook, made by an Odia person, stood out for me: "The most pathetic situation is that Nepal has a century-old tradition with Lord Jagannath and so any student from Nepal should be treated with utmost care if we have faith in Lord Jagannath."

Should hospitality depend on religious faith? Even if we stretch ourselves to identify religious kinship as a crucial bond between cultures, what place does it have in the structures of international education, that too in fields that are far removed from theology, religious study, and philosophy? For an institute that not only marks itself as a venue of engineering education but is keen to situate that education as "industrial", the bond of religion as a criterion of international hospitality seems to uphold the kind of irony that has increasingly come to define the Indian Subcontinent.

I think the sentiment is noble, as religious virtue, in its original capacity, often tends to be. But leaving aside the problem of making such sentiment the basis of hospitality, it's important to attend to the glaring cultures of hierarchy, exploitation and discriminatory hostility that both the tragedy of the student suicide and the vicious institutional riposte against student protests have revealed to us.

Hostility between cultures and communities has long stigmatised the Indian subcontinent, and religious sentiments have hidden these hostilities just as often as they have mobilised them. The alleged harassment of the dead Nepali female student by a student from Uttar Pradesh shows gendered and sexualised exploitation as a natural component of such cultures of discrimination.

"The Indian psyche is full of suppressed violence," the terrifying supercop of Khalistan-era Punjab, K P S Gill, told the poet Dom Moraes, whose book, Out of God's Own (co-authored with Sarayu Srivatsa), is a heartrending account of inequity that passes in the name of diversity in the postcolonial experiment of a nation. As recent events all around us — particularly to the east — have reminded us, this is the culture of the entire Subcontinent. India's place in this culture, as the largest and most powerful nation, has scarcely shaped the responsible leadership its size and economic weight calls for.

"Nepali students should be grateful for the free and subsidised meals and education sponsored by the generous founder of the great institute. That the amount spent on them exceeds the national budget of Nepal!" The shameful language used by some of the faculty and administration members while addressing the protesting Nepali students is the condescension-turned-violent exploitation that mainstream India has often revealed for its more marginalised neighbours. I cannot help but see echoes of the kind of discrimination and bullying that even students from India's Northeast have long weathered in the higher education institutions of Delhi. The invocation of religious solidarity with Nepal through a shared devotion to Lord Jagannath is almost a parodic invocation of our government's purported policy towards Hindus in the neighbouring states, which it sees as an ocean of hostility against Hindus – something to which the recent incidents in Bangladesh have offered some sad verisimilitude.

These are trying times for residential higher education in India, which has only known the largely male hostel population across engineering colleges unified by more or less homogenous career goals. Student mental health across engineering colleges, with its violent culture of bullying, discrimination, and competitiveness, has spawned nightmares of its own over the decades, with poor and caste-oppressed students paying the heaviest prices. As residential higher education expands beyond the technical and the professional, moving to more holistic models of liberal arts and sciences that draw a greater share of women, it makes up a student body with more variegated career goals. The challenges of residential education, integral to a liberal arts education, rise to new planes. Almost around the same time the Nepali student took her own life at KIIT, tragedy struck the campus of Ashoka University in the National Capital Region, taking the lives of two students in an accident and a suicide. And there have been many others in recent years.

Residential education, while a wonderful and empowering thing, providing an experience the commuter student can never get, is still a relatively new experience in modern India, where it once thrived in institutions like Nalanda and Takshashila, attracting large groups of students from neighbouring countries. While modern residential higher education is common and customary in a country like the US, in modern India, leaving one's home, family, and town to go and give up four years of tender, crucial life to the trust of an institution is still a nascent phenomenon. Both the excitement and risks this new life brings forth need a long and hard reckoning.

Keeping communal discrimination and sexual exploitation out of the already challenging experience of residential education would be a good place to start. If done well, this model of higher education is certain to auger empowered beginnings to the independent careers of youth across our Subcontinent. But to betray these entrusted lives can mean snuffing them out even before they are properly lit.

Majumdar is the writer, most recently, of, The Amateur: Self-Making and the Humanities in the Postcolony

EDITORIAL

Costly Confrontation

The bitter dispute between the Union government and Tamil Nadu over the three-language policy is related to the principles of federalism and linguistic identity. Tamil Nadu's steadfast opposition to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, particularly its language provisions, has allegedly resulted in the withholding of over Rs 2,152 crore in education funds under the Samagra Shiksha scheme by the Centre. Tamil Nadu's resistance to the three-language formula is rooted in history. The state has witnessed major anti-Hindi agitations in the past, from the 1930s protests against Rajaji's move to introduce Hindi in schools to the violent demonstrations of 1965 that resulted in the deaths of dozens of protesters. For a long time, Tamil Nadu has maintained a strict two-language policy — Tamil and English — which it sees as essential to preserving its linguistic and cultural heritage. Successive Dravidian governments, whether DMK or AIADMK, have remained firm on this stance.

The Centre insists that the NEP 2020 does not force any state to adopt Hindi, only that students must learn at least two Indian languages alongside English. In theory, this offers flexibility. But in practice, Tamil Nadu perceives it as a backdoor attempt to promote Hindi. The fear is that given the limited resources available to teach non-Hindi Indian languages, Hindi would inevitably become the default third language in most schools. Further scepticism arises from the BJP-led government's consistent push to promote Hindi across various sectors, including education, administration, and official communication. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has framed Tamil Nadu's opposition as a politically motivated stance, accusing the state government of having a narrow, outdated view. He argues that rejecting the NEP denies Tamil Nadu's students global opportunities and deprives them of learning India's rich linguistic heritage. But Tamil Nadu's argument is not just about sentiment—it points to practical achievements. The state's two-language system has not hindered its educational progress. In fact, Tamil Nadu outperforms many other states in literacy rates, school enrolment, and higher education metrics. The argument that adding a third language will automatically improve students' prospects is not backed by any conclusive evidence.

The real concern, however, is not just about education policy but about coercion. By withholding crucial education funds, the Centre appears to be punishing Tamil Nadu for refusing to comply with a policy it never agreed to. This raises serious questions about federalism and cooperative governance. Education, though placed in the concurrent list during the Emergency, has traditionally been a state subject. Forcing a state to adopt a policy by cutting off essential funding sets a dangerous precedent and undermines the very spirit of India's diverse federal structure. The BJP's push for the three-language policy also needs to be viewed in the context of its electoral ambitions in Tamil Nadu. The party has long struggled to find a foothold in the state, and the language debate provides a political battleground. Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK, sensing an opportunity, has framed the issue as another attempt at Hindi imposition. The DMK is willing to turn this into a major political flashpoint ahead of the 2026 state elections. This confrontation helps both parties politically — the BJP can position itself as the champion of the NEP and national unity, while the DMK can reaffirm its Dravidian identity and stand as a protector of Tamil culture. However, it is the students and the education system that ultimately bear the brunt of this standoff. A compromise is needed to ensure that Tamil Nadu's linguistic identity is maintained while enabling students to access diverse learning opportunities. The Centre must recognise that uniform policies cannot work in a country as diverse as India, and states should have the autonomy to decide what works best for their people.

Rather than using financial blackmail to enforce compliance, the Union government should engage in meaningful dialogue with Tamil Nadu. If the aim of the NEP is truly to enhance education rather than impose a particular ideology, it should allow states the flexibility to implement reforms in a way that aligns with their linguistic and cultural realities.

The UGC's mandate is to elevate, not strangulate

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has been in the news again, with the States pushing back on its directive on the procedure for appointment of vice chancellors. It is unusual for chief ministers to concern themselves so closely with minutiae of this kind, but those of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have campaigned against it, terming the directive unconstitutional as it impinges upon matters that are the prerogative of the States. They are particularly unhappy that the UGC may be cementing the practice of Governors choosing vice chancellors. As the States shoulder much of the burden of financing universities, and have a deciding role in instituting them, their insistence that the elected State government rather than the Governor appointed by the Centre have the final say has validity.

Pulapre Balakrishnan,

Honorary Visiting Professor, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram

A meaningful innovation

However, the substantive part of the UGC's recent directive was an amended guideline for the qualifications for a vice chancellor. The requirement that the vice chancellor must be an academic has been rescinded, and eligibility has been extended to persons who have distinguished themselves in other fields, including industry. This is actually a rare instance in recent times of a meaningful and potentially gainful innovation by the UGC. Globally, heads of academic institutions have not always been professional academics. In the U.S., former secretaries of state are invited to serve as faculty in the best universities of that country. The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge have distinguished themselves by choosing as their heads ex-parliamentarians, writers, and journalists, and no one has thought the practice odd. The public very likely see such appointments as adding value, as most of these individuals would have had **exceptional careers**.

India is not a stranger to this practice. Over 50 years ago, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appointed G. Parthasarathy as the first vice chancellor of JNU. He had played many roles in a distinguished career of public service and went on to launch JNU as a premier university of India. So the suggestion that inducting persons from outside to assume leadership of the university is likely to be damaging is unwarranted.

How the UGC should be judged

Not only is it far fetched to decry the UGC recommendation on the qualifications for a vice chancellor as "unconstitutional" and against the spirit of federalism, but such complaints detract from a scrutiny of the UGC's record on the parameter by which it ought to be judged. The UGC was established, by an Act of Parliament, in 1956, with the express intention that it maintains acceptable standards of higher education across the country. What it has instead succeeded in achieving is to have imposed a uniformity of rules and regulations across universities while achieving next to nothing in elevating them to global standards in the dissemination and production of knowledge. The poor preparedness of India's graduates has been flagged in public. Recently, a judge of the Supreme Court lamented the quality of young lawyers practising in India's courts. Some years ago, the head of a leading company of the Tata Group spoke of the quality of engineers India is producing. Note that this only points to the standard of instruction in the higher education system. We have not even begun to talk of the quality of research, including that of the PhDs being awarded.

Curiously, the UGC seems to have nothing to say on the quality of education in universities. Instead, it deploys all its resources and energies to procedural matters that are best left to the educational institutions themselves. Its interventions encompass rules on an attendance requirement for students, the regulation of faculty time, the maintenance of records on examinations conducted, and procedure by which the curriculum is chosen. Some of these requirements were part of the apparatus of generalised surveillance of the natives in colonial times. It is unfortunate that they have not been junked. Much of it has no bearing on learning, apart from undermining faculty performance, the lifeblood of the university. Having managed to tie down a university's functioning to the last detail, the UGC has succeeded in expunging all agency from faculty, who once took responsibility for learning outcomes but consider themselves no longer accountable for them, as their wings have been clipped. Fifty years ago, the university was a freer space and with greater faculty presence. It is difficult to make sense of the development that the 1991 reforms have been accompanied by more intrusive regulation of India's universities. It is also difficult to makes sense of the fact that as the country's per capita income has risen, the stature of its public university has measurably declined. Work at the cutting edge of science by Satyen Bose in Dacca and S. Chandrashekar in Madras in the early part of the last century took place in public universities at a time when India was far poorer.

The production of knowledge is an enterprise without borders. Nothing demonstrates this better than the spectacular emergence of DeepSeek, the AI App from China. We must reflect deeply on why India is not a player in this game. Globally, universities are one of the sites of production of knowledge but those in India are not governed with a view to attaining this goal. A high compliance burden due to micro management by the regulator and excessive social engineering imposed by political parties have resulted in their persistent underperformance. The UGC's original mandate behoves it to address the situation.

Micro management by the UGC and excessive social engineering imposed by political parties have resulted in the persistent under-performance of our universities

The languages we speak

We need to open up the tired political debate and focus on multilingualism rather than Hindi
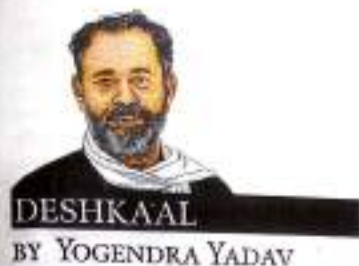
DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

THE STAGE IS set for another round of political debate on the three-language formula (TLF). Ironically, our policy makers will debate the merits of three versus two languages just as the country sleepwalks into a de-facto one language policy, an English Only policy that flies in the face of common sense and expert wisdom on education. Worse, this state-sponsored cognitive, cultural and civilisational regress from multilingualism to monolingualism is being celebrated as modernity.

TLF is the official name for a policy that schoolchildren should be taught three languages. The 1968 compromise suggested the following: "Hindi, English and modern Indian language (preferably one of the southern languages) in the Hindi speaking states and Hindi, English and the Regional language in the non-Hindi speaking States." This compromise was arrived at when the chief ministers of the country sat together to work out a language policy in the wake of anti-Hindi protests in the South. First mooted by the Radhakrishnan Commission in 1948-49 and accepted by the first education commission, the Kothari Commission, the formula was incorporated in the first and second Education Policy formulated by the Congress governments in the 1960s and 1980s.

Here is the basic rationale for TLF: India is not just plurilingual, in that Indians speak different languages. India is multilingual in that most of the communities and individuals in our country use more than one language. Therefore, our education system must be geared towards survival and promotion of the multilingualism that is constitutive of Indian identity. There is considerable evidence now to show that multilingual education helps cognitive flexibility, divergent thinking, scholastic achievement, creativity and social tolerance. TLF is just a convenient way of operationalising multilingualism.

An expert group of linguists and educators — including D P Pattanayak and Ramakant Agnihotri — concluded that "The three-language formula is not a goal or a limiting factor in language acquisition, but rather a convenient launching pad for the exploration of the expanding horizon of knowledge and the emotional integration of the country." ('Position paper of the National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages', National Curriculum Framework, 2005 by the NCERT). This group recommended that children can learn, step by step, more than three languages, as learning additional languages actually helps the learning of the first and second language.
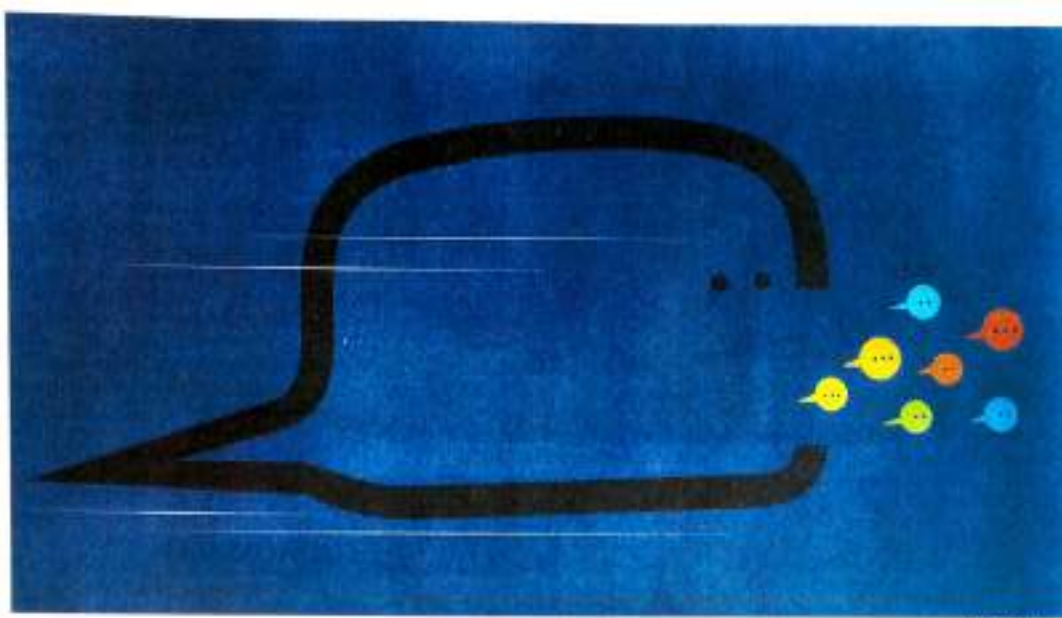
What's the debate, then? The Union government has withheld a substantial grant under the Samagra Shiksha Scheme from Tamil Nadu for its non-compliance with the National Education Policy (NEP). The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M K Stalin, has re-

fused to accept this diktat on the ground that his party is opposed to the TLF. The state has always taught two languages – Tamil and English. Insisting on a third language, he says, is a pretext to impose Hindi. Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan says the TN government will have to abide by the Constitution. Stalin has asked Pradhan to cite the relevant provision of the Constitution. Given its emotional overtones and the assembly election in Tamil Nadu next year, this confrontation is likely to be played out when Parliament resumes its Budget Session.

No doubt, the DMK government has good reasons to be offended and suspicious. The Narendra Modi government has repeatedly violated the letter and spirit of federalism. The Tamil Nadu Governor is brazenly acting on behalf of the BJP. The Modi government has repeatedly encroached upon the powers of state governments in the education sector, the policy of appointment of vice-chancellors being the latest instance. Besides, the Union government cannot use central funds as a stick to force state governments to adopt education policies, that too on sensitive issues like language choice.

Having said that, there are many issues with the NEP, but the TLF is not one of them. The fact is that the NEP has simply reiterated the TLF, which was an integral part of the first and second education policy documents as well. If anything, the NEP of 2020 actually dilutes the formula by omitting any mention of Hindi. Now the TLF is that children should be taught any three languages chosen by the state, provided two of these three languages should be "native Indian" languages. And it allows classical languages like Sanskrit and Tamil to be counted within the two Indian languages. So, if Tamil Nadu wants, it can teach Tamil plus Malayalam or Telugu or Kannada, and English. It could even teach Tamil, classical Tamil and English to meet the requirements of the new TLF. So, Tamil Nadu can now consider TLF without any fear of Hindi imposition.

So, instead of opposing the TLF, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister could offer to accept it, provided it is uniformly implemented across

> It is not Tamil Nadu but Hindi states that have sabotaged the TLF. The original consensus was for Hindi-speaking states to teach another modern Indian language, preferably a South Indian language. Initially, there were some plans of teaching Tamil in UP, Telugu in Haryana, etc. But soon the Hindi states found a short-cut. Sanskrit, or rather a rudimentary and mechanical rote learning of the language, was presented as the 'third language', thus bypassing the need to learn any other script or language. So, effectively, the TLF became an unequal bargain.

all states of the Indian union. He could offer to introduce Hindi in Tamil Nadu schools provided all the Hindi-speaking states adopt Tamil or any other South Indian language as the "third language", as was indeed envisaged in the original formula. Or else, the state could introduce Classical Tamil as the third language, besides English and Tamil, just as Hindi-speaking states have introduced Sanskrit as the third language.

Such a move could highlight the simple fact that it is not Tamil Nadu but Hindi states that have sabotaged the TLF. The original consensus was for Hindi-speaking states to teach another modern Indian language, preferably a South Indian language. Initially, there were some plans of teaching Tamil in UP, Telugu in Haryana, etc. But soon the Hindi states found a short-cut. Sanskrit, or rather a rudimentary and mechanical rote learning of the language, was presented as the "third language", thus bypassing the need to learn any other script or language. So, effectively, the TLF became an unequal bargain. While non-Hindi speakers were required to learn Hindi, Hindi speakers were not required to reciprocate. Hence, the political resentment against the TLF. It is time to call this bluff.

If the central government is serious about TLF, and about not imposing Hindi, it should not make TLF a condition for release of central grant. Instead it should call a meeting of chief ministers, on the same lines as in 1968, and evolve a national consensus. And it must not allow Hindi-speaking states to get away with Sanskrit as a substitute for third language. This could help open up the tired political debate on language and focus on multilingualism rather than Hindi.

This would be a test of our political class to take on the elephant in the room, the hegemony of English in our education system. It may be easier to resist a repressive and authoritarian state or to stand up to an industrial-military complex than to break free of the dense web of power that is the rule of the English language.

Yadav is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan

CR Sankumar

New VC appointment rules undermine State autonomy

K S TOMAR

The UGC's draft guidelines, while ostensibly aimed at ensuring uniformity in VC appointments, have opened a Pandora's box of political and constitutional concerns

The University Grants Commission's (UGC) draft guidelines proposing a shift in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors (VCs) have ignited a political storm. By granting Chancellors—predominantly Governors—the authority to constitute search-cum-selection committees for appointing VCs, the UGC has stirred concerns about federalism, state autonomy, and academic independence.

Adding to the controversy, non-compliance with these guidelines could disqualify state universities from UGC funding schemes, creating a direct clash between the Centre and opposition-ruled states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh. This move, seen as a veiled attempt to centralise power over state universities, places the spotlight on India's federal structure and the simmering tension between state governments and Governors, especially in opposition-led states. At the core of the debate is the growing role of Governors, often viewed as proxies of the Centre, in state governance.

Historically, state governments have played a central role in appointing VCs by constituting independent search committees. However, the UGC's draft proposes a shift, granting Governors—functioning as Chancellors of state universities—control over these committees.

Governors, constitutionally expected to act as neutral figures, have increasingly been accused of serving partisan interests, particularly in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal. By formalizing the Governor's role in academic appointments, the UGC guidelines risk politicising the process, potentially undermining academic independence and turning universities into ideological battlegrounds. The fears of state governments are not unfounded.

In Tamil Nadu, for example, the DMK has accused the Governor of deliberately delaying VC appointments to push candidates aligned with the ruling party at the Centre. Similarly, Kerala has witnessed repeated stand-offs between the Governor and the state government over academic appointments. The new guidelines only add fuel to these already volatile relationships.

The UGC's draft guidelines also raise significant constitutional questions. Education, as a subject under the Concurrent List, allows both the Centre and states to legislate on it. However, the Constitution also upholds federal principles, granting states substantial control over their universities.

The new guidelines, by empowering Governors to dominate the VC appointment process, are being viewed as an encroachment on states' jurisdiction. Several states may challenge these guidelines in court, arguing that they violate the federal structure enshrined in the Constitution. States like Tamil Nadu have already passed laws to curtail the Governor's powers in academic governance, reflecting a broader pushback against what they see as an overreach by the Centre.

For opposition-ruled states, where educational institutions are often viewed as bastions of intellectual and political autonomy, the UGC's guidelines have deepened fears of central overreach. The ruling dispensations in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal have expressed strong apprehensions about Governors using this newfound authority as an extension of the Centre's political influence.

In West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's government has long accused the Governor of interfering in the state's affairs, particularly in the educational domain. The UGC guidelines could exacerbate this friction, allowing the Governor to influence appointments to academic institutions. Such moves, critics argue, undermine the intellectual independence that universities in the state have historically enjoyed.

In Kerala, where the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government has vociferously defended educational autonomy, the guidelines are being seen as an outright encroachment on the state's constitutional rights. The state government fears that politicised appointments could compromise the ideological neutrality and academic standards of its universities.

The DMK-led Tamil Nadu government has also repeatedly opposed the Governor's increasing interference in educational appointments. The state has even passed legislation to reduce the Governor's control over the VC selection process, only to have it stalled by the Governor. For Tamil Nadu, these new guidelines are a direct challenge to the state's efforts to safeguard its educational institutions from external political influence.

Universities, as centres of higher learning, thrive on autonomy and academic freedom. The UGC's intervention threatens to compromise these principles by potentially turning VCs into political appointees. Critics argue that such appointments could erode academic independence, with VCs prioritising political allegiance over educational excellence. In opposition-led states, this concern is particularly acute.

The fear is that such interference could stifle intellectual diversity, with universities becoming vehicles for propagating the central government's political agenda. This interference also undermines the confidence of academicians and researchers.

Scholars worry that political considerations will outweigh merit in appointments, leading to a decline in the quality of higher education. The resulting chilling effect could discourage free thought and innovation in academic institutions.

The controversy over VC appointments is emblematic of a larger tussle between the Centre and states over federalism. For states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, the guidelines represent an erosion of their autonomy in managing critical domains such as education. This growing centralisation also poses questions about the role of Governors in a federal structure.

A balanced approach, one that respects state autonomy while ensuring accountability in academic governance, is the need of the hour. Without such a resolution, the guidelines risk becoming another flashpoint in the Centre-state relationship, with significant implications for India's federal structure and the future of its education system.

(The writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist)

> **THE FEAR IS THAT SUCH INTERFERENCE COULD STIFLE INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY, WITH UNIVERSITIES BECOMING VEHICLES FOR PROPAGATING THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S POLITICAL AGENDA**

Deadly cost of hyper-competitive education

AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

ISN'T it absurd that we can't think of anything beyond a set of technical solutions — say, the installation of 'suicide proofing' fans in hostel rooms, or nets in balconies and lobbies — to the recurring problem of suicides or the abrupt end of the life-journey of broken/shattered/disillusioned young students in Kota, which is a site of the demonic coaching industry?

Well, in recent times, the business of the Kota coaching industry has somewhat declined because of the 'bad' name it got as newspapers began to report regularly about the pathetic mental health of young aspirants. In fact, the number of students in Kota is falling and, as a report reveals, the annual revenue of this business enterprise has been reduced to Rs 3,500 crore from Rs 7,000 crore.

However, nothing seems to have changed as far as the agony of young minds is concerned. In this year only, seven students have ended their lives by suicide and sought to convey the message that they

could not bear the pressure and fulfil the parental aspirations for 'good' careers/lucrative salary packages.

It is sad that we are not yet ready to think of a meaningful solution to this sort of suicide beyond the parameters of the typical 'law and order' discourse or even a set of routine 'counselling sessions'.

In fact, it is high time some of us began to raise certain critical issues we seldom talk about. In this context, as a teacher and concerned citizen, let me make four observations.

First, what has severely damaged the 'intellectual' psychic growth of our children is the faulty pattern of education that has attached almost one-sided importance to one's performance in standardised tests, like the JEE, NEET and CUET. It has systematically devalued what really matters for the intellectual, aesthetic and moral development of the child.

And, I have no hesitation in saying that these standardised tests destroy the joy of learning and kill the ecstasy of a creatively nuanced critical pedagogy.

Instead of arousing the learner's curiosity or activating higher ability to think, interpret, contemplate and go deeper into the exciting domain of sciences and humanities, these problematic MCQ-centric tests transform him/her into a 'war strategist', continually mastering the 'technique' of identifying the 'one and only one correct answer' — instantly and mechanically.

Second, in addition to the obsession with standardised tests, we are witnessing another disturbing phenomenon — the growth of 'dummy schools'. As these schools have a setting with coaching centres, young students need not attend regular classes and take part in the dynamics of school culture. Instead, they do what coaching centres dictate — say, the act of mastering the 'success manuals' or all sorts of strategies for cracking such tests as the JEE and NEET.

Be it physics or mathematics, biology or chemistry,

CRIPPLING: As education is increasingly marketed, it loses its libertarian potential. FILE PHOTO

everything is reduced to an MCQ question. No wonder, the formative years of these youngsters are spent in an environment that promotes endless drilling, mental fatigue and hyper-competitiveness and the chronic fear of failure.

It destroys the joy of learning, or the art exploring the domains of science, culture and aesthetics holistically, creatively and mindfully. No wonder, they miss what a comprehensive school culture provides — say, a life-long relationship with good teachers, a spirit of fellow feeling and the joy of music, theatre, sports and other 'non-utilitarian' creative pursuits.

Third, it is equally impor-

> What has severely damaged the intellectual growth of our kids is the one-sided importance to one's performance in tests like the JEE, NEET and CUET.

tant on the part of the parents to accept a set of fundamental facts about their children's unique aptitudes, inclinations, capabilities and mental orientations. For instance, there is no harm if your child is not particularly inclined to science and mathematics. Likewise, it is possible for a child to have deep interests in the so-called 'soft' domains — say, music, literature, aesthetics, theatre or social work.

And, it is not a mistake on the part of your child if she/he needs some breathing space for exploring and understanding what she/he really wishes to do in life.

However, as the anxiety-ridden middle class parents abhor any 'risk', they want their kids to follow what is seen as the standardised path towards a 'secure' career.

So, these youngsters, irrespective of their inclinations and capabilities, are compelled to nurture the same ambition that is seen as 'acceptable': the desire to become a software engineer or a doctor. Quite often, it becomes exceedingly difficult for them to bear the resultant psychic pressure and fulfil the unnatural parental ambitions.

No wonder, it is now common to find a suicide note like this: "I ran the worst daughter. Sorry mummy, papa. Yeh bata option hai."

And finally, let us accept that the routinised acts like pariksha pe charcha or a set

of counselling sessions fail to address the real issue.

The fact is that these youngsters are suffering because we live in an over-populated society of perpetual scarcity.

Moreover, because of the neoliberal/market-driven doctrine of hyper-competitiveness and the resultant logic of the survival of the fittest', the commodification of almost every aspect of life seems to have become normal. As education is increasingly commodified and marketed, it loses its libertarian potential. Nobody joins the coaching industry to think critically or activate the faculties that make us truly humane, compassionate and sensitive.

Likewise, these days, the worth of being educated is measured primarily in terms of 'placement and salary package.' And this reckless pressure to emerge as a 'saleable commodity' or a 'resource' that the market needs to use tends to cripple one from deep inside. Alienation or chronic nervousness is the price of 'success'. Indeed, as the latest National Crime Records Bureau data suggests, with 13,044 student suicides in a year, an 'epidemic is sweeping India.'

When will we wake up, initiate a movement for structural and cultural transformation and give a life-affirming vision of education and vocation to our children?

नई शिक्षा नीति पर सस्ती राजनीति

स्टालिन का यह दावा नितांत भ्रामक और भड़काऊ ही है कि तमिलनाडु पर हिंदी या संस्कृत थोपी जा रही है

प्रो. निरंजन कुमार

प्रसिद्ध यूनानी दार्शनिक प्लेटो का कथन है, 'शिक्षा राजनीति की दासी नहीं, बल्कि सत्य और प्रगति का मार्गदर्शक होनी चाहिए।' दुर्भाग्य से ब्रिटिश शासन में मैकाले और स्वतंत्रता के बाद विभिन्न राजनीतिक दलों और उनसे जुड़े शिक्षाविदों ने राजनीतिक स्वार्थों के लिए शिक्षा का दुरुपयोग किया, जिससे छात्रों, समाज और राष्ट्र को खासा नुकसान हुआ। वर्तमान में भी राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति-2020 को लेकर तमिलनाडु सरकार द्वारा केंद्र सरकार से की जा रही राजनीतिक रस्साकशी न केवल अवांछनीय है, बल्कि तमिलनाडु के छात्रों के हित में भी नहीं है। यह भारतीय संविधान की भावना के अनुरूप भी नहीं है। वर्तमान विवाद तमिलनाडु के मुख्यमंत्री एमके स्टालिन द्वारा राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति (एनईपी) 2020 के कुछ और विशेष रूप से उसके भाषाई प्रविधानों को लेकर उठा है। स्टालिन एनईपी-के कई पहलुओं, जैसे त्रिभाषा सूत्र और कामन यूनिवर्सिटी एंट्रेंस टेस्ट का विरोध कर रहे हैं। त्रिभाषा सूत्र को लेकर उनका आरोप है कि यह तमिलनाडु पर हिंदी और संस्कृत को थोपता है और इससे तमिल भाषा और संस्कृति पर खतरा है। स्टालिन ने एनईपी को समग्र शिक्षा अभियान और पीएमश्री स्कूल से जोड़ने के लिए भी केंद्र सरकार की आलोचना की है और प्रधानमंत्री मोदी से समग्र शिक्षा अभियान के तहत धन जारी करने की अपील की है। इसके अतिरिक्त उन्होंने भारतीय संविधान के संघीय चरित्र का भी हवाला दिया है कि शिक्षा समवर्ती सूची में आती है और इसमें राज्यों को पूरी स्वायत्तता है।

तमिलनाडु के आगामी विधानसभा चुनावों से पहले राजनीतिक लाभ की कोशिश में स्टालिन सरकार इस तरह के दावे कर रही है। इस आशंका में कि द्रमुक इस मुद्दे पर राजनीतिक लाभ न उठा ले, तमिलनाडु की विभिन्न राजनीतिक पार्टियां भी स्टालिन के स्वर में स्वर मिला रही हैं। मुद्दे को पूरी तरह से समझने के लिए एनईपी-2020 की निर्माण प्रक्रिया को जानना प्रासंगिक होगा। 21वीं सदी की सामाजिक, आर्थिक और तकनीकी चुनौतियों का सामना करने के लिए तैयार हुई एनईपी-2020 को दुनिया भर में सराहा गया। तमिलनाडु सहित देश के चारों कोनों से 2.5 लाख

तमिलनाडु में भाषा पर भड़काऊ राजनीति ◦ प्रेट

ग्राम पंचायतों और 676 जिलों के शिक्षाविदों, जनप्रतिनिधियों से प्राप्त सुझावों के आधार पर तैयार एनईपी-2020 सच्चे अर्थों में राष्ट्रीय है। एनईपी तैयार करने वाली समिति के अध्यक्ष के. कस्तूरीरंगन स्वयं तमिल मूल के हैं। एनईपी तो भारतीय भाषाओं और बहुभाषावाद को बढ़ावा देती है। इसमें संविधान की आठवीं अनुसूची की सभी 22 भाषाएं शामिल हैं। नया त्रिभाषा सूत्र पहले यानी 1968 और 1986 की त्रिभाषा नीतियों की तुलना में अधिक समावेशी और लचीला है। पहले की त्रिभाषा नीति में हिंदी-भाषी राज्यों में अंग्रेजी, हिंदी और एक अन्य भारतीय भाषा की पढ़ाई जाती थी, जबकि हिंदीतर राज्यों में अंग्रेजी, राज्य की क्षेत्रीय भाषा और हिंदी का प्रविधान था, लेकिन नई नीति में छात्र कोई भी दो भारतीय भाषाएं पढ़ सकते हैं। अब हिंदी या कोई भी भाषा विशेष अनिवार्य नहीं है यानी तमिलनाडु या किसी भी राज्य का छात्र तेलुगु, मलयालम, कन्नड़, मराठी, हिंदी, संस्कृत, या आठवीं अनुसूची की कोई भी भाषा पढ़ सकता है। इसलिए स्टालिन का यह दावा कि तमिलनाडु पर हिंदी या संस्कृत थोपी जा रही है, भ्रामक और भड़काऊ है।

नए त्रिभाषा सूत्र से छात्रों को अन्य भाषाओं और संस्कृतियों को समझने का अवसर मिलेगा। इससे तमिलनाडु सहित सभी राज्यों के लोगों को व्यापार, व्यवसाय और अन्य क्रियाकलापों में आसानी होगी। संवैधानिक दृष्टिकोण से भी त्रिभाषा नीति भारतीय संविधान की भावना के अनुरूप है, क्योंकि त्रिभाषा से उपजे बहुभाषावाद से लोगों में आपसी समझ एवं आत्मीयता बढ़ेगी। भाषाएं केवल संचार की माध्यम नहीं, साहित्य-सांस्कृतिक समझ को विकसित कर सामाजिक सौहार्द को बढ़ावा भी देती हैं। शिक्षा समवर्ती सूची में है, लेकिन अनुच्छेद 254 के अनुसार यदि राज्य और केंद्र के कानून में विरोधाभास हो, तो केंद्र का कानून प्रभावी होगा। इसके अलावा अनुच्छेद 257 यह सुनिश्चित करता है कि राज्य सरकारें ऐसे कदम न उठाएं, जो केंद्र की नीतियों में अवरोध बनें। कामन यूनिवर्सिटी एंट्रेंस टेस्ट या मल्टीपल एंट्री-एग्जिट जैसी व्यवस्था तो सराहनीय और छात्रहित में हैं। इनका विरोध विशुद्ध राजनीति ही है। यदि भविष्योन्मुखी एनईपी-2020 तमिलनाडु में लागू नहीं होगी तो वहां के छात्र राष्ट्रीय और वैश्विक अवसरों से वंचित रह जाएंगे।

स्टालिन बेबुनियाद आरोप लगा रहे हैं कि मोदी सरकार तमिल भाषा और संस्कृति को कमजोर कर रही है, जबकि मोदी संभवतः पहले प्रधानमंत्री हैं, जिन्होंने तमिल भाषा-संस्कृति को बढ़ावा देने का अधिकतम प्रयास किया है। तमिल कवि-दार्शनिक तिरुवल्लुवर के नाम पर विश्वभर में तिरुवल्लुवर सांस्कृतिक केंद्र स्थापित करने की योजना, तमिल साहित्य को बढ़ावा देने के लिए तिरुक्कुरल और अनेक प्राचीन तमिल ग्रंथों का विभिन्न भाषाओं में अनुवाद कराकर उन्हें प्रसारित करना, वाराणसी में 'काशी-तमिल संगमम' के जरिये उत्तर भारत में तमिल भाषा-संस्कृति के प्रचार की दूरदर्शी पहल, तमिल कवि सुब्रमण्यम भारती की जयंती पर देश भर में भारतीय भाषा उत्सव मनाना या तमिल भाषा में विभिन्न अखिल भारतीय परीक्षाओं का आयोजन कराना, ये सभी कदम प्रधानमंत्री मोदी की तमिल भाषा-संस्कृति के प्रति गहरी प्रतिबद्धता को दर्शाते हैं।

(लेखक दिल्ली विश्वविद्यालय में वैल्यू एडिशन कोर्स कमेटी के अध्यक्ष हैं)

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Should a third language be compulsory?

Why is the Union government delaying funds under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan to Tamil Nadu? When was the three-language policy first introduced and what did it mandate? What are the challenges in having extra language courses in government schools?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

There has been a tussle between the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government over the three-language formula in schools under the New Education Policy (NEP), 2020. The Union government has indicated that it needs to be complied with for release of funds tied to the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. However, the Tamil Nadu government views it as a 'smokescreen' for Hindi imposition and insists that it would continue with its two-language policy.

What are constitutional provisions?
The Constitution provides that Hindi is the official language of the Union. English was originally meant to continue as the official language for 15 years from the commencement of the Constitution (till 1965). However, the Official Languages Act, 1963 provides for the continued use of English, in addition to Hindi, for all official purposes of the Union without any time limit. The legislature of a State may adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the State or Hindi as the official language(s) for official purposes of that State.

Further, the Constitution provides that it shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India.

What is the three-language policy?
The three-language formula was first introduced in the NEP of 1968. This policy and the Official Language Resolution, 1968 mandated the teaching of Hindi as a language in non-Hindi speaking States. There were protests against the same in Tamil Nadu and it has steadfastly followed its two-language policy of teaching Tamil and English in its government schools.

A protest against the three-language policy, in Chennai, on February 18. PTI

The NEP, 2020 has retained the three-language formula albeit with a key difference that it doesn't impose any language on any State. It specifies that the languages to be learnt will be the choice of States, regions and the students, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India.

What are the issues?
The Annual Status of Education Research (ASER) conducted regularly by renowned NGO Pratham leaves much to be improved upon with respect to learning abilities. The report of 2022 indicates that close to 50% of students in Class V could not read a Class II level text. The report of 2023 reveals that 25% of youth in the age group of 14-18 years could not read a Class II level text fluently in their regional language. More than 40% of this age group could not read sentences in English. The learning outcomes in foundational numeracy skills like subtraction and division is equally poor.

As per the report on 'Analysis of Budgeted expenditure on Education' prepared by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in 2022, out of the total revenue expenditure on elementary education estimated at ₹3.03 lakh crore (2019-20), 15% is spent by the Centre while 85% is spent by the States. The total expenditure on elementary, secondary, higher and technical education by the Centre and States combined hovers around 4-4.5% of the GDP as against the target of 6% set out in the NEP 2020. Thus, the expenditure on education is yet to reach the desired levels.

What can be the way forward?
While English is not a native language, its proficiency has helped us in becoming globally competitive in various service industries. India is a multi-lingual country and the objective of learning more Indian languages in schools is desirable. However, the existing issues of learning outcomes coupled with constraints on resources require that the efforts of government run schools should be focused on improving the teaching of the mother tongue/local language and English, apart from foundational numeracy skills. Even in private schools where a third language is taught till Standard VIII, there is limited proficiency being attained by the students in such language.

The 2011 Census data reveals that approximately 26% of India is bilingual and 7% is trilingual. The corresponding figures for urban areas are 44% and 25%, as against 22% and 5% for rural areas. With rapid urbanisation and migration of labourers across the country, this number is bound to increase in the forthcoming Census, indicating that the young and adult population would learn additional languages according to their needs.

There must be a constructive dialogue between the Centre and the Tamil Nadu government to ensure that funding is not delayed.

Considering the share of expenditure borne by the States as well as regional diversities, there also needs to be a productive discussion on providing more autonomy to the States in policy matters relating to school education.

Rangarajan. R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

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Women pioneering change in Indian higher education

SUJATHA KSHIRSAGAR

Women academic leaders and entrepreneurs are not only shaping institutions but also fueling India's socio-economic growth with their grit and determination

Women are leading from the front today – in academics or education, media, healthcare, armed forces and many other fields. The country is witnessing a pivotal shift in how women leaders were perceived before. Indian higher education landscape is also being driven by a strong women-led force, laying the foundation of the nation's progress, unlocking opportunities for socio-economic growth, self-reliance and an improved quality of life. Needless to say, education is essential for women's empowerment in the journey to Viksit Bharat. Educated women drive change, uplift families, strengthen communities and fuel national progress, creating a lasting impact for future generations.

The current scenario and notable mentions

Indian higher education remains male-dominated when it comes to leadership, even as women are playing a significant role, data suggests. In 2021, women headed just 9.55 per cent of Indian higher educational institutions, whereas men headed 89.57 per cent. This makes more inclusive representation of females in academic leadership extremely important. If we compare India with the international landscape, it still has a huge gap to fill. Internationally, 25 per cent of leadership positions in the top 200 universities globally are occupied by women.

The good news is that the picture is drastically changing, especially over the last few years. Even in the past, the country has seen visionary women leaders like Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer who, alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, established India's first school for girls in 1848, championing women's education and social justice.

Other notable and pragmatic women leaders who are marking a significant shift in higher education include Ms Rashmi Mittal, Pro-Chancellor, of Lovely Professional University, and Dr Uma Bhardwaj, Vice-Chancellor, of Noida International University. Other honourable mentions include Dr Madhu Chitkara, Pro-Chancellor at Chitkara University and a Higher Education entrepreneur with a vast experience 42 years, who has built a successful university from scratch; Dr. Ananya Mukherjee, Vice-Chancellor of Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR, recognised as an Institution of Eminence.

Apart from that, women leaders in business and entrepreneurial space have also inspired aspiring Indian youth. Notable mentions include Kiran Mazumdar Shaw and Indra Nooyi. Women leaders are transforming Indian higher education through inclusive environments and innovation. More women in leadership positions increase diversity and bring new perspectives to academia. Through their efforts, they are paving the way for future generations to have a more progressive and equitable educational landscape in India.

The Challenges Faced by Women Leaders in Academia

The challenges for women leaders include social stereotypes at one end and the barriers of an institution at the other. Several women are even still facing serious prejudices against them regarding their potential as leaders, especially in traditional fields. Women lack opportunities to get mentors and network for their professional advancement.

The chief issues for women leaders worldwide relate to work-life balance and insufficient presence in senior leadership positions. India has taken a holistic approach to orient and train women faculty across the country through the University Grants Commission (UGC).

These initiatives are designed to prepare women for leadership roles, equipping them with the right skills and knowledge. Other countries have programs that focus on leadership training and inclusivity to break barriers for women in academia. Some countries have witnessed an impressive increase in the number of women represented in academia, but the world still has a long way to go, including India.

Women as Educators and Leaders

Empowerment in education is not merely a question of access; it involves equipping women with the role of teachers, leaders, and models. An increased number of women in schools and colleges has acted as a motivating force for girls to achieve excellence in academics. Diverse viewpoints among women in higher education leadership institutions create an inclusive and innovative atmosphere.

Female professors have formed the backbone for progressive educational policy and research quality. Many critical departments and significant research initiatives now have women running them, evidence of their burgeoning influence in university life.

Programmes and fellowships dedicated to providing opportunities for girls and women, especially in these STEM fields, have helped a culture of creativity and excellence flourish within these disciplines. At present, there are some of India's most high-profile universities and institutions, with women at the helm, spearheading the trend of making education more accessible and equitable. Women leaders are playing an important role in academics.

For instance, women-led institutions, like competitive exam coaching institutions, have been responsible for guiding thousands of students in shaping their aspirations. Thus, it is clear that women leaders can bring transformational change in education and can be great change managers.

Women as Catalysts or Agents of Change

Women are educators and agents of change. They are innovators who are good leaders in filling knowledge gaps, fostering inclusivity, and empowering communities. Their contribution to a forceful, solution-focused, and responsive workforce is particularly indispensable for the simple reason that it is tantamount to ensuring not only economic prosperity but also social justice.

The most deep-seated effect of women in education has been in adult literacy and skill development. Women educators have led the process of increasing rural and marginalised communities' literacy rates, greatly improving their socio-economic conditions. Female entrepreneurs also are revolutionising education delivery by coming up with innovative solutions for diverse learners across India.

EdTech platforms of female founders have promoted flexible models, digital classroom applications, and AI-based analytics with their introduction; thereby, performance from students at high-quality education gets scaled up because access to more is also made easily feasible. Social development and the tech revolution are mutually supporting each other here.

The Future of Women's Leadership in Higher Education

Increasing the number of women leaders in higher education is not only about gender equality; it is a strategic imperative for India's progress.

Women leaders in higher education institutions bring diverse perspectives and transformative decision-making into academic administration, which drives innovation and excellence. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has recognised the importance of women's participation in academia and thus proposed reforms, to ensure gender inclusivity. Through the incorporation of leadership training under the framework of higher education and initiating mentorship opportunities, India can usher in an optimum pipeline of women academic leaders. Furthermore, the vision of Viksit Bharat and Atmanirbhar Bharat is in line with the very need to absorb India's demographic dividend. Education is at the heart of this vision, and empowering women as educators and leaders would be crucial in realising India's aspiration to become Vishwaguru—that is, a global leader in innovation and knowledge.

Conclusion

Women leaders are undeniably shaping the future of Indian higher education. Despite all existing challenges, their excellence is bringing innumerable positive transformations within the present academia, which will lead to a more inclusive, progressive, and innovative educational landscape. The overall transformation of Indian education and the socio-economic liberalization of India can be achieved by removing all barriers to leadership, implementing supportive policies, and championing women's participation in higher education.

(The writer is President at Career Launcher; views are personal)

> APART FROM THAT, WOMEN LEADERS IN BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SPACE HAVE ALSO INSPIRED ASPIRING INDIAN YOUTH. NOTABLE MENTIONS INCLUDE KIRAN MAZUMDAR SHAW AND INDRA NOOYI. WOMEN LEADERS ARE TRANSFORMING INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND INNOVATION

NEP tussle

The escalating tussle between Tamil Nadu and the Union government over the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is not just a dispute over language policy – it is a deeper battle over state autonomy, cultural identity, and federal governance. Tamil Nadu, historically resistant to Hindi imposition, views the NEP as a direct challenge to its well-established two-language policy. The Centre's decision to withhold crucial educational funds unless the state aligns with the NEP has only intensified this conflict, turning an educational framework into a political flashpoint. Tamil Nadu has long championed its two-language policy – Tamil and English – as a reflection of its linguistic heritage and a tool for maintaining cultural distinctiveness. The three-language formula proposed under NEP, while ostensibly flexible, is perceived in the state as a veiled attempt to introduce Hindi through the backdoor. This resistance is deeply rooted in decades of opposition to linguistic homogenisation, dating back to the anti-Hindi agitation movements of the 20th century. The present standoff reinforces the sentiment that language policies cannot be dictated from the Centre without acknowledging regional aspirations. However, the state's opposition to NEP goes beyond language. Tamil Nadu argues that the policy undermines its autonomy in shaping education tailored to its socio-cultural needs. The state has sought to develop its own education policy, one that aligns with its principles of social justice and inclusivity. The NEP, with its push for vocational education from an early stage, has raised concerns about reinforcing caste-based occupational roles – an issue that Tamil Nadu has actively worked to dismantle over the decades. The Centre's decision to withhold over Rs 2,000 crore in Samagra Shiksha funds has further fuelled this dispute. Education, a subject on the Concurrent List, requires cooperative federalism, but the conditional release of funds undermines this principle. The state government has framed this move as an attempt to strong-arm Tamil Nadu into submission, calling it "blackmail." Even the opposition within the state, despite political differences, has largely supported the DMK government's stand, underscoring the widespread rejection of NEP in the region. On the other hand, the Centre argues that NEP is designed for national educational standardisation and that Tamil Nadu should not be an exception. It insists that the three-language formula does not mandate Hindi but offers flexibility, allowing students to learn any third language, including foreign languages. However, given the historical context of language politics in Tamil Nadu, such assurances have not allayed fears of cultural imposition. This standoff highlights a broader issue – the delicate balance between national policy frameworks and regional autonomy. Education is not just about curriculum and language; it is about identity, opportunity, and governance. Tamil Nadu's defiance is not merely political posturing but a reflection of deep-seated concerns about central overreach. A resolution to this conflict will require dialogue, mutual respect, sagacity, and a recognition that a one-size-fits-all approach to education may not work in a diverse nation like India.

A for Apple, why?

Systematic and collective resistance against such normalised practices which are largely hegemonic in nature, is necessary to build an inclusive and independent system. Shadow wars on others' languages, especially on English, or futile grumbles of dejected hearts on International Mother Language Day shall neither save the mother nor the tongue. One has to understand that the best way to save a people's language is to preserve their culture and to instil a sense of pride among people about their own culture. If the tongue is to be saved, the mother needs to be saved first.

There is a popular joke about apples in the district of Murshidabad. A middle-aged father asked his ailing son whether he was gaining in strength each time the latter finished a slice of apple offered to him during his recovery from fever. This apparently not-so-funny joke speaks volumes about the relationship a rural child shares with the expensive and 'medicinal' fruit, the apple. It may sound absurd to urban ears, but, as they say, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.

Many children from rural areas in this country, especially children from families of small farmers, taste an apple for the first time in their life when they fall sick and a country quack advises the family to provide nutritious food to the ailing child. Thus the apple is an alien, elite too, fruit to such ill-fated children of rural India.

By no means is this fruit an integral part of their frugal existence, let alone their culture. But the worst irony of the existing education system in this country lies in the fact that the first English word an Indian child formally learns is apple!

It would be an impossible task to explain the reason behind the introduction of such a fallacious learning mechanism, without citing the impact of an obstinate and undying colonial hangover.

It is a well-known fact that the British colonialists introduced a Eurocentric academic curriculum in India, especially at the primary level, with the objective of hegemonising young Indian minds into the European culture and value system.

They planned to achieve this goal by instilling the idea of a superior Western culture among young Indian students through the English language. Thus the English language, in this context, served a dual purpose – first, it worked as a medium of communication, and, secondly, as a communicator of Western culture and its inherent value system. This was cunningly designed to produce a hybrid community – Indian in skin and British in taste.

Subsequently, this newly emerged hybrid community developed a staunch sense of distaste towards its own language and, more importantly, its culture. To understand the politics of alienation involved in the entire process and also to facilitate a cultural fight back, the networks of linguistic and cultural hegemony need to be deconstructed at the very outset. Therefore the classic 'A for apple' equation and its cultural resonances must be understood vis-à-vis this larger politico-cultural framework.

It is quite normal to kick-start the formal cognitive process of a Western child with the image of an apple as it is one of the most common cultural images in Western countries, especially in England. Apple is so amply available in these countries that many of their dishes contain the fruit in one form or another. Even some of their religious scriptures and popular cultural texts contain multiple references and allusions to the apple.

Thus, an apple is such a popular image in Western culture that it catches the imagination of a Western child easily and quickly. Therefore, it is expected that their formal cognitive process would start with such a hugely popular image as that of an apple. 'A for apple' is thus not only expected but also effective from the cultural as well as cognitive perspective.

However, it is weird to repeat the same in the Indian context for obvious reasons. There is no denying the fact that knowledge of the English language is crucial in a vastly globalised world where English is used as the global lingua franca. But teaching and learning of the English language must not be done through a curriculum that may contain seeds of cultural or psychological colonisation.

A close study of some of the well-known stories and rhymes taught at the primary and pre-primary levels across India would reveal the Eurocentric nature of the existing academic framework in this country. Added to that, most of the pictorial illustrations supplied with stories and rhymes in the primary readers have explicit European touches.

In one such illustration, accompanying a popular farmer's story, the farmer is shown to have been dressed up almost like Sherlock Holmes with a hat and a pair of gumboots in the European context, this image is perfectly alright. But this creates a completely false image of a farmer in the budding Indian minds. Thus children get alienated unknowingly from Indian realities.

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In the same way, the relations between the black sheep and its master, between the farmer and his farm, between God and his creation etc. have been represented through Eurocentric images and sign systems. Thus, while learning the English language, children get immersed in a world that has no connection whatsoever with the world around them.

This intellectual alienation ultimately leads to cultural alienation, which, in the long run, proves fatal for this community of young learners. As stated earlier, an unpolished and unqualified contempt for whatever is originally theirs develops within such children and they feel ashamed to speak their mother tongue and also to have regard for their own culture.

Closing down of English medium schools, or dropping the English course from the academic curriculum, or imposing the so-called Indian knowledge system on children won't be a feasible solution to this serious problem. A rational restructuring of the existing English curriculum at the pre-primary and the primary levels, emphasising liberal and diversified Indian cultural images and icons, may initiate a whole new process of cultural re-membering. English language taught through Indian stories and rhymes with typical Indian images and sign systems can be a viable alternative to the current conflicting curriculum. In doing so, the role of language as a communicator of culture must be kept in mind.

The words of the Kenyan author and intellectual Ngg wa Thiong'o are highly suggestive in this context. While explaining the relation between language and identity he said, "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture..."

The long existing colonial residues in the overall academic curricula, especially at primary and pre-primary levels, must stop now and forever. Time is ripe for Indian policy makers to frame a curriculum for primary and pre-primary students that would encourage both teachers and learners to approach English as a medium of communication first and then as a carrier of culture – Indian culture of course. Appropriate and useful texts and techniques must be introduced with a view to creating an Indian cultural environment within the curricula and also within the classroom.

Without dispelling the aura of cultural superiority associated with English language, the spell of the cultural false consciousness among Indian students shall never be broken. This applies to other hegemonic discourses too. Therefore, systematic and collective resistance against such normalised practices, which are largely hegemonic in nature, is necessary to build an inclusive and independent system. Shadow wars on others' languages, especially on English, or futile grumbles of dejected hearts on International Mother Language Day shall neither save the mother nor the tongue. One has to understand that the best way to save a people's language is to preserve their culture and to instil a sense of pride among people about their own culture. If the tongue is to be saved, the mother needs to be saved first.

मुश्किल नहीं परीक्षा के प्रेशर को कम करना

श्रद्धा वशिष्ठ

परीक्षा का समय स्टूडेंट्स के लिए बेहद तनाव और चिंता का कारण बनता है। चाहे कॉलेज में एडमिशन के लिए एंट्रेंस एग्जाम हो, बोर्ड परीक्षाएं या फिर चौथी-पांचवी के बच्चों के एग्जाम-मानसिक दबाव सभी पर होता है।

नुकसानदेह रवैया | भारतीय शिक्षा प्रणाली में स्टूडेंट्स के मनोबल को अनदेखा कर केवल परिणामों पर ध्यान केंद्रित किया जाता है। राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति (NEP) 2020 में यह स्पष्ट रूप से कहा गया है कि छात्रों के मानसिक स्वास्थ्य को प्राथमिकता दी जानी चाहिए। परीक्षाओं में अत्यधिक दबाव और मानसिक तनाव को कम करने के लिए स्टूडेंट्स के समग्र विकास पर ध्यान केंद्रित करना जरूरी है।

व्यक्तित्व का निर्माण | रवींद्रनाथ टैगोर के मुताबिक, 'शिक्षा का उद्देश्य केवल ज्ञान प्राप्त करना नहीं, बल्कि व्यक्ति का मानसिक और आत्मिक विकास भी होना चाहिए।' शिक्षाविद डॉ. के. कस्तूरीरंगन ने NEP 2020 के संदर्भ में कहा था कि परीक्षाओं के दबाव को कम करने के लिए शिक्षा को लचीला और छात्रों की मानसिक स्थिति के अनुरूप बनाना अत्यंत आवश्यक है। इसी तरह से, प्रोफेसर यशपाल का मानना था कि शिक्षा प्रणाली को विद्यार्थी-केंद्रित होना चाहिए, जहां केवल अकादमिक ज्ञान के बजाय मानसिक और भावनात्मक विकास पर भी ध्यान दिया जाए।

आत्मनिर्भरता का साधन | महात्मा गांधी ने कहा था कि सच्ची शिक्षा वह है जो मनुष्य को खुद तैयार करना और दूसरों के प्रति सहानुभूति रखना सिखाती है। स्वामी विवेकानंद ने भी शिक्षा को बाहरी ज्ञान से अधिक आत्मनिर्भरता का साधन माना है।

दबाव का असर | विभिन्न रिपोर्ट और आंकड़े बताते हैं कि परीक्षा के दबाव के कारण देश में हर साल सैकड़ों स्टूडेंट्स आत्महत्या कर लेते है। इन

AI image

कॉमन रूम

घटनाओं के पीछे एक बड़ा कारण यह भी है कि स्टूडेंट्स को मानसिक स्वास्थ्य सेवाओं का सही मार्गदर्शन नहीं मिल पाता। स्कूलों और कॉलेजों में मानसिक स्वास्थ्य पर जागरूकता की कमी और परीक्षा के दबाव के कारण स्टूडेंट्स अपनी समस्याओं का समाधान नहीं खोज पाते।

एग्जाम के दौरान मानसिक दबाव को कम करने के उपाय : '

● स्टूडेंट्स को टाइम मैनेजमेंट और सही तरीके से तैयारी करने की कला सिखाई जानी चाहिए।

● स्कूल-कॉलेजों में मानसिक स्वास्थ्य के लिए काउंसिलिंग सेवाएं हो।

● NEP 2020 के तहत यह सुनिश्चित किया जा रहा है कि स्टूडेंट्स पर एग्जाम का प्रेशर कम आए।

● परिवार को समझना होगा कि परीक्षा के मुश्किल समय में बच्चों को उनकी जरूरत है, उनकी हिम्मत बढ़ाएं।

पूरी हो तैयारी | आज के तेजी से बदलते समाज में सफलता की परिभाषा महज अंक और परिणामों तक सीमित नहीं होनी चाहिए। यह याद रखा जाए कि शिक्षा का उद्देश्य केवल किताबों से ज्ञान प्राप्त करना नहीं है। स्टूडेंट्स के मानसिक, भावनात्मक और शारीरिक स्वास्थ्य का भी ध्यान रखना जरूरी है। समय आ गया है कि हम बच्चों को केवल परीक्षा की नहीं, जीवन की संपूर्ण तैयारी करने में मदद करे।

(लेखिका सबको शिक्षा फाउंडेशन की फाउंडर है।)

A legacy of visionary education and unyielding innovation

SAKSHI **PRIYA**

BIT Mesra not only honours its storied past but also paves the way for future innovations in areas like AI, rocket science and STEM empowerment

Education is the cornerstone of societal transformation, shaping individuals who drive progress and innovation. BIT Mesra, celebrating seventy years of excellence, exemplifies how a visionary commitment to learning can create enduring impact.

Founded in 1955 by industrialist B M Birla at a time when India was laying the groundwork for its technological future, BIT Mesra quickly emerged as a prestigious centre for innovation. Originally established to foster technological growth, it has expanded over the decades to offer diverse programmes in engineering, science, management, architecture, and space research. Today, a dedicated faculty of 600 and a vibrant student body of over 10,000 continue to make the institution a hub for knowledge and creativity.

The Platinum Jubilee celebrations underscored both the rich legacy and forward-thinking vision of BIT Mesra. Dignitaries, including President Droupadi Murmu, attended the event, where discussions highlighted the institute's contributions to advancing technology—particularly in artificial intelligence and machine learning—and recognised the increasing participation of women in STEM fields. These milestones not only celebrate past achievements but also pave the way for future innovations.

BIT Mesra's impact on India's technological journey is profound. The establishment of the country's first Department of Space Engineering and Rocketry in 1964 set a precedent for pioneering research, while collaborations with organisations like ISRO keep its academic community at the forefront of scientific development. Moreover, a vast and active alumni network reinforces the strength of its academic foundation and continues to drive advancements across various industries. Beyond classroom learning, BIT Mesra emphasises inquiry, critical thinking, and the practical application of knowledge to solve real-world challenges. Commemorative symbols such as the silver medal, stamp and envelope released during the Jubilee serve as tangible reminders of the institute's role in molding innovative minds prepared to meet future demands.

Creating and sustaining such an institution is a collaborative effort. Leadership, faculty, students, and alumni all contribute to a culture that values excellence, innovation, and independent thought. As industries and technologies evolve, BIT Mesra's role expands from merely imparting education to equipping individuals to navigate change, lead advancements and contribute meaningfully to society.

Fostering interdisciplinary research, nurturing entrepreneurship and promoting inclusive education are essential strategies for ensuring its continued relevance. With seventy years of legacy behind it, BIT Mesra remains both a guardian of its proud traditions and a dynamic force for future progress. Its ongoing mission is to build on its storied past while relentlessly pushing the boundaries of knowledge, research, and education in an ever-changing world.

(The writer is a staffer with the Pioneer; views are personal)

Future-proofing employability: The skills will set you apart

DINESH **SOOD**

The future belongs to those who embrace continuous learning, adapt to emerging trends and cultivate a blend of technical and soft skills

The rapidly evolving global landscape of the job market presents exciting opportunities and formidable challenges. With technological advancements reshaping industries and global hiring trends influenced by economic shifts, the most valuable asset for professionals will be their skills. Understanding market demands and proactively adapting will be crucial for those considering a career transition.

The Demand for Skills in a Rapidly Evolving Market

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs 2023 report, the most demanded skills by 2027 will include artificial intelligence (AI), enormous data competency, creative and analytical thinking, leadership, social influence, and continuous learning. However, only 50 per cent of employees today have access to adequate learning opportunities and six out of ten will need upskilling within the next few years. This widening skills gap presents both a challenge and an opportunity for professionals to invest in their development and distinguish themselves in a competitive job market. Businesses, too, are grappling with the rapid pace of technological change. By 2027, nearly 44 per cent of workers' core skills will be impacted, creating an urgent need for companies and employees to embrace continuous learning. Those who adapt swiftly will find themselves in high-growth sectors with ample career opportunities.

Bridging the Skills Gap

By 2025, an estimated 97 million new jobs will be created globally, driven by AI, the Internet of Things (IoT), and robotics. Yet, many of these positions may remain unfilled due to a shortage of skilled professionals. In India, AI adoption has already reached 68 per cent across industries, with banking and financial services leading at 68 per cent, followed by technology at 60-65 per cent. However, the lack of qualified tal-

ent threatens to slow this progress. India produces 1.5 million engineering graduates annually, yet only 45 per cent meet industry standards, and just 10 per cent secure jobs, according to Team Lease Digital. The challenge extends beyond technical expertise—employers are also looking for strong communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, often overlooked in traditional education.

The Changing Nature of Work

The rise of automation, AI, and robotics is shifting job requirements. The McKinsey Global Institute highlights that social, emotional, and higher cognitive abilities are becoming more critical while manual and basic cognitive skills are declining.

For example, cyber security is experiencing an unprecedented demand, with 3.5 million positions currently unfilled across technology, telecom, and manufacturing. These roles require technical expertise, strategic thinking, and leadership capabilities. Similarly, industries such as 5G equipment manufacturing, climate technology, and renewable energy are booming. Professionals with hybrid skill sets—combining technical knowledge with business acumen—are increasingly sought after.

The Education System's Role in Workforce Readiness

To meet the demands of Industry 4.0, education must evolve. Despite India's extensive network of over 40,000 institutions and nearly 1,000 universities, there remains a disconnect between academic learning and industry requirements. According to NASSCOM, India's technology sector will need over

> **IN INDIA, AI ADOPTION HAS ALREADY REACHED 48 PER CENT ACROSS INDUSTRIES, WITH BANKING AND FINANCIAL SERVICES LEADING AT 68 PER CENT, FOLLOWED BY TECHNOLOGY AT 60-65 PER CENT. HOWEVER, THE LACK OF QUALIFIED TALENT THREATENS TO SLOW THIS PROGRESS**

une million engineers with AI and emerging technology expertise within 2-3 years. However, the digital skills gap will increase from 25 per cent to 30 per cent by 2028, underscoring the urgency for a job-ready workforce.

Closing the Gap Through Collaboration

A key solution lies in stronger collaboration between universities and online learning platforms. Real-world, industry-aligned education can significantly enhance employability. A recent Hire-Pro report revealed a stark disconnect in perception: while 70 per cent of colleges believe their graduates are job-ready, only 16 per cent of employers agree. With Gen Z set to make up 27 per cent of the global workforce by 2025, bridging this gap is critical.

The Role of Technology in Job Creation

The digital revolution continues to transform industries. Cloud computing, AI, and machine learning are driving innovation, with 59 per cent of IT professionals in large companies having already deployed AI solutions, according to the IBM Global AI Adoption index 2023. By 2026, India's IT sector alone is projected to contribute $350 billion to the GDP. However, workforce readiness remains challenging, highlighting the need for urgent action to close the skills gap.

The Power of Continuous Learning

Success in today's workplace is no longer defined solely by a degree. Employers increasingly prioritise skills over formal education, making continuous learning essential for career advancement. Upskilling

through workshops, online courses, and certifications is now a necessity rather than an option. Many companies partner with e-learning platforms to provide tailored training programmes, ensuring employees acquire technical and soft skills. This investment in learning and development benefits individuals and strengthens businesses in the long run.

The Growing Value of Soft Skills

While technical expertise is critical, soft skills such as problem-solving, communication, and adaptability are equally valuable. In a dynamic and fast-changing work environment, professionals with strong interpersonal skills will have a competitive edge, enabling them to lead teams, collaborate effectively, and manage complex projects.

The Future: Adaptability is Key

The workforce of the future will belong to those who embrace skill development and lifelong learning. Whether you're a fresh graduate or an experienced professional, adaptability will be the key to long-term success. Educational institutions and online platforms must work together to equip professionals with the right mix of technical and interpersonal skills. In a world where change is the only constant, staying ahead requires a commitment to growth and a willingness to evolve with the times.

(The writer is a Co-Founder and MD of Orion International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), and a Network Member, of India International Skill Centres, an initiative of GoI; views expressed are personal)

Unfit to Work

Most candidates realize their lack of job readiness in their final year of studies or shortly after graduation, when acquiring necessary skills demands significant time and money. This leaves them unemployed or unfit for any viable self-employment. While being unemployed is unfortunate and disheartening, being unemployable is disastrous leading to a cascade of negative emotions like impatience, frustration, and anger among youth

NSDC International Academy

India's biggest challenge is not just unemployment, but the unemployability of over 80 crore youth. Although the employable percentage has increased from 33.9 per cent in 2014 to 51.3 per cent in 2024, a grim reality persists: over 47 per cent of graduates remain unqualified for industry jobs (National Skill Development Council, NSDC).

Moreover, available data also reveals that over 70 per cent of engineering graduates are deemed "unemployable," and more than 80 per cent lack advanced digital skills, largely due to theory-based assessments and insufficient practical experience. Further, only 40 per cent of this segment opts for internships, exacerbating the issue.

Most candidates realize their lack of job readiness in their final year of studies or shortly after graduation, when acquiring necessary skills demands significant time and money. This leaves them unemployed or unfit for any viable self-employment.

While being unemployed is unfortunate and disheartening, being unemployable is disastrous leading to a cascade of negative emotions like impatience, frustration, and anger among youth, often resulting in their socially and legally unacceptable behavior on roads, markets, restaurants and seen in public places.

The real issue in our country is not unemployment, but unemployability. It is not the lack of job vacancies or self-employment opportunities, but the lack of employable skills that plagues our youth. Social barriers, especially for girls, hinder their participation in higher education leading to a loss of nearly 30 per cent of the potential workforce.

The preference for government jobs over private entrepreneurship stifles innovation and self-reliance. Our society which is trying to embrace modern technology in the workplace also needs to cultivate discipline among the youth through strict upbringing and possibly affordable skill education.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted the need for local industrial infrastructure and grassroots vocational training as millions lost their jobs during mass migrations.

Broadly, our youth, who need attention, can be categorized into four groups:

* Those who stop at primary education and become the blue-collar segment.

* Those who complete schooling but do not pursue further education due to economic, family, or social reasons and reservations. They can read and write but lack any skill for getting employed, becoming part of the White Collared Dropout Segment without any direction.

* Undergraduates, for example students passing out from scores of ITIs), graduates or postgraduates with limited employment options, forming a frustrated white-collar segment. Mostly, they get absorbed in low-paid jobs involving long hours of physical strain devoid of any sustainable life style.

* Students who pass out from mediocre professional colleges, (which have mushroomed all over the country), in multiple streams like Engineering, Medical, or IT. Here also, most of them lack the right skills required by industries, hospitals, or other organisations, contributing practically nil to nation-building.

A population of 138 crore, including over 60 crore youth, should ideally be an asset. However, the unemployability factor has turned this potential asset into a liability. Effective legislation is needed to control population growth, a politically overlooked issue.

As of 2023, India's unemployment rate hovers around 7.6 per cent, with urban unemployment at 8.7 per cent. Young adults (20-24) face an unemployment rate of approximately 22 per cent. Despite economic growth, there is a disconnect between traditional education systems and the skills required by the modern job market.

A 2020 World Economic Forum report states that 33 per cent of India's workforce will need re-skilling and up-skilling by 2025 due to rapid technological changes. As industries transit towards automation and digitisation, conventional degrees alone are insufficient to secure employment.

India's education system faces challenges due to two fundamental parameters: affordability and a common acceptable National language. Affordability remains a barrier, as economic conditions often determine access to quality education. Additionally, the lack of a common language hampers the implementation of skill-based training through a unified platform. Bridging these gaps is crucial for creating an inclusive and effective educational framework that caters to the diverse needs of students. To address unemployability, the following suggestions are crucial:

* Acceptance of a common national language, apart from the vernacular language, for primary and secondary education. It is time we discard branding English Language as colonial and accept it as the one common language across the country.

* Uniform national syllabus in vernacular languages till 12th grade, with compulsory advanced learning of the national language for higher studies.

* Common national language for all professional streams since jobs and the requirement of the right skill do not have linguistic or geographical limits.

* Firm rejection of regional, linguistic, caste, and religious considerations and vigorous promotion of One Nation. Education and Universal Employability ensuring unified national identity. Communal or such harmful baggage or impart negative education only in vernacular language up to class 12 results in lack of professional competency for any professional jobs or any competitive self-employment venture.

* While online higher education presents benefits, challenges like digital literacy and inconsistent internet access in rural areas must be addressed. Currently, only 43 per cent of rural households have internet access, creating a digital divide.

* Upgrade outdated infrastructure of training aids, equipment and tools etc. in all ITIs to match present industry or self employment vocations.

* A comprehensive and uniform policy for selecting, training, and career progression of teachers is needed to match advancements in technology, computers, artificial intelligence, and emerging vocational opportunities. Only a properly trained faculty can train and deliver a future-ready workforce for the country.

While the NEP 2023 makes significant strides in addressing affordability and promoting multilingualism, the challenge of implementing a common national language for skill-based training remains. Continuous efforts and innovative solutions are needed to ensure that all students, regardless of their linguistic and regional background, can access quality education and benefit from skill development opportunities for sustainable employment ensuring decent living standard.

The nation cannot afford to delay addressing unemployability. We need decisive action to tackle this mammoth problem that threatens our aspirations to become a superpower. Along with various reforms, there is a burning need to enforce strict measures to set the country on the desired path. Resistance may arise, but think of it as a sacrifice many soldiers bleed for the salvation of millions.

We desperately require implementation of a common National Education Programme to provide affordable education, skills, and specialized training. It is time for the national political will to initiate corrective measures, considering factors that have exacerbated the problem.

There are no heights which cannot be scaled...there is no success which cannot be achieved...and there is no limit to which human ingenuity cannot reach.

S S SAXENA

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Declining PhD enrolments threaten the research in the country

BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Research scholars are not merely assistants or trainees; they are integral to the progress of research institutions and the country

In recent years, India has witnessed a disturbing trend—a decline in PhD enrolments in national institutions. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, the total number of PhD enrolments in India stood at approximately 2.02 lakh, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of the total student enrolment. While this figure has shown a gradual increase over the years, recent data from premier institutions such as IITs, IISc, and central universities indicate a worrying decline in PhD admissions.

For instance, IIT Bombay saw a nearly 30 per cent drop in PhD applications in 2022 compared to previous years, and similar trends have been observed in other IITs and NITs. Many national institutions find it difficult to find quality candidates, even among those qualified for national-level tests like CSIR, GATE etc. If left unchecked, this trend could have far-reaching consequences for the country's research ecosystem and global competitiveness. Doctoral education is pivotal in knowledge cre-

ation, innovation, and economic growth. A shrinking pool of PhD scholars threatens India's academic and industrial research output and undermines its aspirations of becoming a knowledge superpower.

Research institutions are the bedrock of scientific and technological advancements, serving as hubs for innovation, discovery, and intellectual progress. While principal investigators, faculty members, and senior scientists often receive the limelight for breakthroughs, the research scholars—doctoral candidates, postdoctoral fellows, and junior researchers—form the backbone of these institutions.

Despite their critical contributions, research scholars often face numerous challenges, including funding constraints, lack of job security, and the

pressure to publish. Long hours in the lab, coupled with the demand for high-quality research outputs, can affect their well being. Additionally, exploitation by supervisors is rampant in many universities, with scholars being forced to take on personal tasks.

Institutions must recognise these challenges and work towards creating a supportive environment that ensures their intellectual and personal growth. Moreover, the lack of lucrative career opportunities post-PhD discourages many from taking up doctoral research. While undergraduate and postgraduate programs attract significant enrolments due to their immediate employability prospects, doctoral research is often viewed as a long, arduous journey with uncertain career rewards. Many PhD holders are forced to work on meagre salaries in many academic institutions. In industry, the salary package of a PhD holder is poor compared to people with mere diplomas and degrees.

Higher qualification is a disqualification for many industries. The stagnation of

research fellowships, delays in stipend disbursement, and the lack of well-structured post-doctoral opportunities further deter students from pursuing research. Fewer PhD students mean fewer research publications, reduced global rankings, and decreased funding opportunities. Research scholars are not merely assistants or trainees; they are integral to the progress of research institutions. Recognising their contributions and supporting their journey is essential for the sustained advancement of science and technology.

This, in turn, affects the credibility of national institutions, making them less attractive to international collaborations. A weak research culture forces India to rely on foreign technologies and innovations, increasing dependency on imports and reducing self-reliance. This hampers the government's vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat, making the country vulnerable to technological and economic dependencies.

(The writer is the Dean-Academic Affairs, at Garden City University; views are personal)

Simmering linguistic tension

Finding a solution to the ongoing language row requires acknowledging India's pluralistic identity

The ongoing row over the three-language formula in school education—a policy embedded in the National Education Policy (NEP)—has once again ignited passionate debates. Most recently, Tamil Nadu's political leadership, led by Chief Minister MK Stalin, has sharply criticised the Centre for what is perceived as an imposition of Hindi on the state. This conflict, however, is not isolated; it resonates across states like Karnataka, Telangana and Punjab, each adding its own chapter to the language war. The current uproar finds its roots in the longstanding historical struggle over language imposition in India. In Tamil Nadu, memories of the anti-Hindi agitations of the past still echo, as the state's ruling DMK perceives the insistence on the three-language formula as a subtle attempt to undermine its linguistic identity. Critics argue that by prioritising Hindi alongside English and the regional language, the policy inadvertently sidelines local languages—a concern that resonates deeply in southern states with rich linguistic heritage.

While some view Hindi as a unifying force, many see its promotion as a threat to regional cultures and identities. The conflict is emblematic of a broader pattern where states feel compelled to assert their linguistic identity against perceived central overreach. Stalin and other leaders in Tamil Nadu argue that the implementation of the NEP's language policy is a thinly veiled attempt to erode Tamil's primacy. Similar sentiments have been echoed elsewhere: The Telangana state government has recently mandated Telugu in all schools to ensure that students learn their mother tongue. In doing so, Telangana is not only preserving its linguistic heritage but also simplifying the curriculum for easier comprehension. Even in the northern state of Punjab, the removal of Punjabi from the regional language curriculum in CBSE schools for the 2025–26 academic session has sparked outrage among Punjabis. Political figures like former deputy chief minister Sukhbir Singh Badal has called it an "attack on our mother tongue." Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attempted to soothe these tensions by emphasising that the BJP honours every Indian language and that each language reflects the soul of Indian culture. He maintains that it is a collective responsibility of every citizen to enrich and embrace all linguistic traditions. Even so, opinions remain deeply divided. Hindi imposition row is more than a policy dispute—it is a reflection of deep-seated historical, cultural, and political currents in India. MK Stalin's strong resistance to perceived linguistic hegemony is shared widely in his state. Language is an emotive issue and if not handled properly could snowball into a major crisis. The best solution lies in a balanced, flexible approach that honours India's linguistic diversity. Only through respectful dialogue, tailored policies, and a celebration of diversity can India navigate this complex linguistic landscape and move toward a truly inclusive nation.

More than a subject

The fight to protect Punjabi in schools

THE Punjab government's decision to make Punjabi a mandatory subject in all schools — public and private — goes beyond academia; it is a reaffirmation of linguistic and cultural identity. The move follows outrage over a CBSE draft that omitted Punjabi from its list of regional languages for Class X exams. Though the CBSE later clarified that its norms were only indicative, the controversy reignited concerns over the diminishing role of regional languages in national education policies. This issue is not confined to Punjab. Across India, debates over language policies have intensified, particularly around the three-language formula. States in southern India have resisted attempts to impose Hindi, while many in the northeast continue to demand greater recognition for their indigenous languages. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes multilingualism, but its implementation remains inconsistent, often favouring dominant languages over regional tongues. Punjab's response, therefore, is not just about one language but part of a larger pushback against perceived linguistic homogenisation.

The decision to penalise non-compliant schools and nullify certificates without Punjabi as a main subject underscores Punjab's determination to safeguard its language. However, this raises a fundamental question: should linguistic identity be preserved through mandatory policies, or should it be nurtured through organic cultural promotion? The answer likely lies somewhere in between. While compulsion ensures Punjabi's presence in education, true preservation depends on fostering pride in the language beyond academic mandates.

In a country as linguistically diverse as India, balancing national cohesion with regional linguistic rights is a complex challenge. Punjab's move reflects a broader demand — one that seeks not just recognition but also respect for India's linguistic plurality. The real challenge, however, is ensuring that this respect translates into policies that empower all languages, not just a select few.