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Pinpoint the Talent Gaps



M Muneer

As rhetoric linking unemployment and underemployment to skilling grows louder, a deeper issue is overlooked: India has plenty of STEM graduates, but lacks top talent to lead in emerging tech. The country ranks a distant 7th in AI, with the US and China dominating at the two top spots. Most funding in this sector flows to these leaders. India's tech industry contributes 7.5% to GDP. But without the right skills, is a decline inevitable?

As India Inc looks to leverage new technologies, the widening skills gap is a growing concern. A 2023 PwC report, 'Winning Today's Race While Running Tomorrow's', says that 77% of Indian CEOs cited skill shortages as a barrier to growth, up from 64% in 2019.

To compete in the digital economy, traditional workforce skills must be upgraded. However, a significant portion of the workforce remains ill-equipped for market demands.

► A February 2025 Hero Vired-Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University study, 'Hero Skills of the Future — Vision 2030: Emerging Careers, Skills & Opportunities for Growth', found that 77% of Indian professionals feel inadequately skilled in technologies their employers consider essential.

► Nasscom's 2022 report, 'Reskill and Upskill Now: The Mantra of Future-Fitting the Technology Workforce', states that 50% of India's workforce — about 150 mn people — will need reskilling or upskilling by 2025 to meet industry demands.

► A 2022 AlphaBeta-Amazon Web Services (AWS) study, 'Building Digital Skills for the Changing Workforce in Asia Pacific and Japan', estimates that India will need 3.9 mn cloud professionals by 2025, but currently has fewer than 1.5 mn. This shortage is forcing companies to outsource or rely on a small pool of skilled professionals, increasing costs and slowing digital transformation.

Standardised frameworks to assess current skills and align them with future jobs remain elusive. Traditional talent management lacks real-time insights, creating a mismatch between employee capabilities and organisational needs. With tech evolving rapidly, some skills are becoming obsolete faster than ever.

WEF's 'The Future of Jobs Report 2025' predicts automation will displace 83 mn jobs globally by next year, while creating 70 mn new ones. However, most Indian workers lack the specialised training needed for roles in ML and robotic process automation. Although companies are investing heavily in training programmes, only a fraction of these initiatives leads to tangible improvements.

Reasons for this:

► **No standardised framework**

India has a diverse job market spanning numerous industries, and that presents unique challenges.

► **No skills taxonomy** There's a lack of a shared language for defining and discussing skills, leading to ineffective talent allocation, poor succession planning and inconsistent upskilling. Deloitte's 2022 report, 'The Skills-Based Organization: A New Operating Model for Work and the Workforce', said that only 15% of Indian companies have a well-defined skills taxonomy.

The global workforce is expected to see a crucial shift in job roles. With a huge young workforce, India faces the added challenge of aligning skills with new roles. For instance, growing demand for data scientists or cybersecurity analysts usually outstrips supply of professionals in these areas.

In the BFSI sector, digital transformation has fuelled demand for cybersecurity and data analysis professionals. Again, there's a shortage of skilled professionals here. Nasscom says that India's growing financial sector would require 1 mn cybersecurity professionals by 2027. Only around 3 lakh are available today. New college graduates can only fill a quarter of the advanced technology jobs.

To address these challenges, businesses, government and academia must join hands to adopt a heterogeneous approach. Some pointers:

► **Assess skills gaps** Adapt AI-powered tools to identify real-time skills gaps accurately. Platforms such as Skillsoft and Coursera for Business can recommend skill paths based on goals and existing skills.

► **Invest in continuous L&D** While some companies have been running constant learning and development in the tech sector, similar efforts must be embraced across industries and SMEs. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) can be useful in upskilling young workers. But more PPPs are needed.

► **Develop a skills taxonomy** This will ensure consistency in defining and categorising skills across industries. NSDC is working toward this. But efforts must be accelerated to create a universal framework like the European Qualifications Framework.

► **Align education with industry needs** Academia should play a key role by incorporating practical skill development in curricula. Collaborations between universities and companies will produce students with employable skills.

► **Track impact** Invest in real-time skills-tracking tools to monitor employees' progress and training impact. HR can then align development programmes with evolving business needs.

The writer is co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation

In Education We Must Trust



Amit Kapoor

Govt aims to drive sustainable job creation by simplifying business regulations, fostering labour flexibility — and by prioritising reskilling and upskilling. But there is a clear mismatch between occupational and educational skill levels, something this year's Economic Survey highlights.

53.25% graduates and 29.8% post-graduates in India are employed in low-skilled occupations. 38.23% graduates are employed in jobs requiring specialised skills. This mismatch stems from key challenges — low educational attainment, poor learning outcomes, shortage of high-quality jobs and a limited emphasis on practical skill development.

► **Low educational levels** PLFS data show that over 90% of the workforce has educational qualifications at, or below, the secondary level. Among these, 52.4% have only a primary-level education or less, while 37.8% have completed secondary education.

The 2023-24 UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education) report indicates that current gross enrolment ratio (GER) at the secondary level is 77.4%. NEP 2020 aims to achieve a 100% GER at the secondary level by 2030.

Over the years, at the secondary level, GER has shown a significant improvement of 19.45% (2011-21). However, this trend in secondary education doesn't extend as prominently to higher education levels.

GER for higher secondary levels (grades 11-12) is low (56.2%). Since 2014-15, higher education GER has improved from 23.7% in 2014-15 to 28.4% in 2021-22.

All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data reveals a troubling decline in pass-out rates for UG degrees, showing a decrease of 28.43% from 2011-12 to 2021-22. As a result, only 7.6% of the workforce has a graduate degree, and only 2.2% a PG degree or more.

Consequently, 88% of the workforce is engaged in occupations that require low competencies, such as agriculture, construction labour and clerical work. These issues are also evident at the state level.

States with large demographics, such as Bihar and Assam, report that over 90% of the workforce has low education and skill levels. In contrast, UTs like Chandigarh and Puducherry have made strides in improving educational outcomes, with a higher percentage of their workforce hav-

ing access to higher education and vocational training.

► **Lack of occupational distribution** In 2021, 94% of states/UTs had more than half of their workforce in medium-skill jobs. Over 52% had more than 20% low-skill levels.

Bihar, Chhattisgarh and UP have the highest share of low-skilled workers, while Chandigarh and Goa have the lowest. These issues at the sub-national level further bring to light the urgent need for upskilling initiatives, and vocational education programmes.

This mismatch can be bridged only if we capitalise on the potential of the demographic dividend by improving the quality of education. While NEP and RTE Act have expanded access to education, quality of learning outcomes remains a matter of concern. Improving proficiency in basic subjects, such as arithmetic, science and languages at the school level, is as crucial as aligning the higher education curriculum with Industry 4.0 requirements.

Access to quality higher education affects employability. Addressing gaps is vital to resolving the issue of unemployment at the graduate level and enhancing the country's global competitiveness and productivity across sectors. Also, the country's perception of formal vocational training as a last resort for employment needs to be changed to one of a pragmatic, viable and high-quality option for expanding economic opportunities.

Addressing the broken link between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems and labour markets is imperative to resolving this mismatch. In India, TVET is a key upskilling initiative that focuses on improving skill levels. Yet, only 3.73% of the workforce has undergone vocational training.

While 28.33% of workers have informal training through self-learning or traditional methods, this is insufficient to equip individuals with the competencies required for emerging industries. Only two states have over 10% of their population receiving formal training, and five states have more than 80% of their workforce without vocational training. Progress has been made since 2017. But there is still a gap in improving vocational training across states.

Restructuring formal vocational training through industry-academia partnerships can ensure that the curriculum and students meet demands of India's evolving economy. Integrating on-the-job training into educational and vocational programmes at ITIs should also be enabled earlier in education.

State governments must drive the path to prosperity through strategic action to close the skill gap and develop a workforce that's not only large in numbers but also competitive, skilled and equipped to deal with evolving economic dynamics, and future of the workforce.

The writer is chair, Institute for Competitiveness, Inputs from Sheen Zutshi

SKILLING GAP



Demographic dividend

Strengthening public institutions in the digital age



O P SINGH

Digital transformation is reshaping public policy, it is imperative that we embrace it without compromising our enduring commitment to integrity



I am a civil servant passionate about governance, institutional resilience and public policy, exploring how institutions can adapt to the digital age. Imagine a world where policies are debated, revised and reshaped in real time—governance moving as quickly as a trending hashtag. That world isn't coming; it's already here. Public institutions, once the reliable backbone of governance, are now transforming rapidly.

Social media, instant communication, and shifting public expectations have redefined how governments interact with citizens. Decision-making, once a structured process guided by expertise and long-term planning, now occurs in an environment where public sentiment can change overnight. This new landscape offers both opportunities and challenges. Increased public engagement promotes transparency and participation but also demands rapid responses. Today's challenge isn't just about efficient policy implementation—it's about balancing speed with thoughtful deliberation and adaptability with established structure.

A New Era of Governance

Historically, governance followed a deliberate, structured path. Political leaders set broad directions, while institutions provided continuity, expertise, and safeguards. Decision-making

was data-driven and refined through expert consultation with a focus on long-term national interests. Then the digital revolution changed everything. Social media now plays a central role in shaping public discourse, often setting the agenda before formal institutions can respond.

A 2023 Pew Research study noted that nearly two-thirds of adults in democratic nations now rely on social media for political news. This shift has empowered citizens and made governance more transparent and participatory, but it has also heightened expectations and pressured institutions to act swiftly.

Adapting Without Losing Purpose

The solution is not to resist change but to adapt strategically. Governments worldwide are using digital platforms to improve service delivery and civic engagement. For instance, India's Digital India initiative has streamlined public services online, while Singapore's Smart Nation program uses data analytics to enhance urban planning and governance. These examples show that when technology is integrated thoughtfully, it can boost both effectiveness and accessibility. Adaptation goes beyond dig-



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ital tools—it requires maintaining the integrity of governance. Institutions must prioritise expert-driven decision-making to ensure that policy shifts are well-considered rather than merely reactive. Preserving institutional memory through thorough documentation and continuous training ensures that experienced civil servants provide continuity, anchoring governance in expertise rather than short-term trends. **The Importance of Public Trust**

At its core, governance depends on public trust. Institutions thrive when they are seen as credible, reliable, and fair. Trust is built through transparency, efficiency, and ethical practices.

Governments that openly communicate their policies and decision-making processes foster confidence among citizens. Estonia's e-Governance model, which gives citizens real-time access to government records, is a prime example. Efficiency is equally critical. Reducing administrative delays, streamlining processes, and making governance accessible are key to maintaining public trust. When institutions deliver results fairly and efficiently, they not only function better—they strengthen democracy.

Finding the Right Balance

The digital age demands a balance between responsiveness and deliberation. Institutions must embrace innovation without becoming reactionary, listening to public sentiment while ensuring that policies are grounded in data, analysis, and long-term planning. Quick decision-making should never come at the expense of depth and foresight. This balance distinguishes effective governance from mere administration. Institutions that thoughtfully adapt are not just keeping pace with change—they are actively shaping the future of governance.

Looking Ahead

Public institutions are more than policy enforcers; they are the foundation of national stability and progress. As governance continues to evolve, these institutions must lead through innovation, efficiency, and an unwavering commitment to public trust. The digital age presents both challenges and opportunities. Institutions that adapt wisely will define the future of governance—not solely through speed or efficiency, but with foresight, trust and enduring strength.

(The writer is DGP & Head of Haryana State Narcotics Control Bureau; views expressed are personal)

The student and the three language debate

In the rhetoric of partisan politics surrounding the three language formula, unsurprisingly, the most important stakeholder has been forgotten: the student.

First, it is the child who goes to a public (government) school, and no one else, who should be at the very centre of this debate. Students in public schools form about 55% of the school enrolment in Tamil Nadu. Children in private schools (largely from the upper class) increasingly rely on supplemental learning beyond school hours, i.e., coaching or tuition classes, which a public school student cannot afford. The critical question is this: is learning three (instead of two) languages essential to enable a child from a public school to compete with other more privileged candidates in the job market and become a productive, value-adding citizen?

Second, while the National Education Policy (NEP) is path-breaking on many accounts, there are a few provisions that ignore the ground realities of public education in India, especially at the primary and secondary levels. The three language formula is one such issue.

A problematic hypothesis

The NEP declares that the compulsory learning of three languages is intended to improve the cognitive ability of students, enable mobility for employment and promote national integration. This very hypothesis is a problematic one.

Language is a necessary tool for acquiring knowledge and for communication. However, with the breathtaking progress in technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence, language proficiency itself will gradually lose its significance as a tool for knowledge acquisition. You could post your query in any language, in say Google Gemini (even children in a public school will hopefully soon have access either through a smart classroom or a smartphone), and get an answer instantly.

In the years ahead, this access will only get cheaper and better. There is of course indisputable evidence linking language skills with cognitive abilities, but none which establishes that proficiency in more languages will proportionately improve cognitive abilities. In fact, research suggests quite the contrary – that a strong foundation in a child's mother tongue is essential before introducing additional language(s).

A third language will certainly enable better communication with the community that speaks that language. But that is a choice that most adults make as a part of the profession they choose. Tamil 'thambis' quickly learn Hindi when



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There is no academic merit in thrusting a third language on students; there could be a risk of raising a generation that is handicapped to compete nationally

they join the Indian Army and thrive famously. Tamilian salesmen speak flawless Marathi when they sell their wares in Maharashtra.

Third, the state of primary education is pathetic, nationally and in Tamil Nadu, as highlighted in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Survey 2024. Despite some good initiatives in recent times, 88% of class three students in Tamil Nadu still lack basic literacy proficiency.

The challenge is even greater with the second language, English. Many top-scoring students, even from English-medium public schools, struggle to adapt when transitioning to English-medium instruction in college, particularly in professional courses, because in the school, they are taught in Tamil, not in English.

Focus on teaching and learning

The response to the shocking state of quality in primary (and carried forward to secondary and higher secondary) education is to massively improve teaching quality and learning outcomes, and not to add one more language. There is a finite time available at school to 'cover' all subjects. With acquisition of knowledge getting easier and quicker through technology, education should increasingly focus on developing attributes such as curiosity, critical thinking and creativity, which are critical to success in the 21st century. There is a need to provide more time and space in the curriculum for inculcating these traits, rather than thrusting a third language. Within this finite time, it is important to enable deeper learning than wider learning.

Fourth, it is not clear how public schools would be able to find adequate and competent teachers for a third language, even assuming that every parent chooses Hindi and not a variety of other languages. There is every reason to fear the quality of teachers leading to inferior learning. Despite Tamil Nadu having one of the highest per-child education budgets in the country, 80%-90% of the budget is spent on teacher salaries, while infrastructure suffers. The cost of having third language teachers could eat into the funds available for infrastructure.

Language is a great anchor of cultural values. National unity is indeed a foundational value, and the Constitution provides for the propagation of Hindi. While a common language is desirable, it would be at the tail end of cultural initiatives to promote unity. A spirit of respect for other cultures and a shared sense of history should be an integral part of learning. A third language is neither the only nor a superior way to inculcate these values.

That said, education should lead to a choice of

gainful employment opportunities. So long as opportunities for public school students are available within the State, either from government, private enterprise or self employment (the case thus far), the need for a third language may not be critical. However, the system outcomes must facilitate wider choices for students from Tamil Nadu to compete for the best educational and employment opportunities, nationally and even globally.

So long as English continues to be an official language in examinations for central services, the defence services and the judiciary, students from Tamil Nadu should be able to compete at a national level, as they have done successfully for several decades. Better teaching/learning of English would improve their competitiveness in the world, which is increasingly looking for English-literate service providers.

The politics and the student

So, what is the way forward? There are two dimensions to this problem: politico-cultural and child development.

The right or wrong of the ruling party's politics on the issue is not the subject of this article. But it is important to acknowledge, from a child development perspective, that it is a two-front political battle, i.e., one, stopping Hindi 'imposition' on the State; and two, fighting to retain the robust status of English nationally. The second is a more challenging task.

The State's politics may not harm the future of students, as long as English continues as an official language at the Centre with equal force and usage.

However, if, nationally the landscape is likely to change with Hindi progressively replacing English (in spirit even if not in letter because of constitutional safeguards), the State's politics should factor this reality and seriously consider insulating the child's development from the crossfire of political battles.

Here is a possible approach that has the interests of the child in mind.

Since there is no academic merit in thrusting a third language on the child, particularly at the primary level, Hindi could be offered, as an option as a third language from middle public school. This could be started in schools in the district headquarters and progressively expanded to other schools, depending on demand, which, in turn, will depend on the momentum of Hindi replacing English at the national level.

A rigid political position could result in a generation of students that is handicapped to compete nationally. This issue should be a debate and a discussion, and not a war that destroys the future of the young.

Mind our language — the variances in Hindi and English speaking across India

Data shows that people in non-Hindi States are more willing to learn and speak new languages, while the same cannot be said for those in the Hindi belt. Moreover, those in the south have gravitated towards English as the secondary language, with the share of Hindi speakers remaining stagnant, which explains why resistance to policies such as the three-language formula is more pronounced in the south

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The latest exchanges between Tamil Nadu and the Centre over Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) funds has reignited the long-standing language debate. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has reaffirmed the State's opposition to Hindi imposition and reiterated its commitment to the two-language policy.

Meanwhile, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has dismissed these allegations. "Tamil is one of the oldest languages of our civilisation. But what is wrong if a student in Tamil Nadu will learn multilingual aspect in education? It can be Tamil, English and other Indian languages. There is no imposition of Hindi or any other language," he had said in February.

If we strip away the details, the core tension once again revolves around a question that has long gripped non-Hindi-belt States — especially those in the south — whether implementing the three-language formula indirectly imposes Hindi. An equally important question arises — regardless of whether the three-language formula amounts to an imposition — does data on development indices make a stronger case for English as the link language over Hindi?

Put differently, should native Hindi speakers be encouraged to learn English for broader access and mobility, or should non-Hindi speakers be asked to learn Hindi, for their supposed "benefit"?

Multilingualism among States

First, data indicates that non-Hindi speakers are generally more open to learning new languages, whereas Hindi speakers exhibit lower multilingualism. Chart 1 presents the share of monolinguals — individuals who speak only their native language (first language/mother tongue) — across select States. For instance, in 1991, 84.5% of native Tamil speakers in Tamil Nadu (those who speak Tamil as their first language in the state) were monolingual, a figure that dropped to 78% by 2011. Similarly, the share of native Odia speakers in Odisha who were monolingual declined from 86% to 74.5%. Similar trends can be observed among Marathi speakers in Maharashtra, Punjabi speakers in Punjab, Gujarati speakers in Gujarat, Telugu speakers in Andhra Pradesh, and other non-Hindi-speaking States, indicating a steady shift toward multilingualism.

In contrast, States where Hindi is the predominant first language already had a high share of monolinguals, and in many cases, this share increased over time. For instance, in 1991, 90.2% of Hindi speakers in undivided Bihar were monolingual. By 2011, in divided Bihar, this figure had risen to 95.2%. Similarly, in Rajasthan, the share of monolinguals among Hindi speakers increased from 93% in 1991 to 94.3% in 2011.

A comparable trend can be observed among Hindi speakers in Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh as well.

Chart 2 presents the inverse of Chart 1, illustrating the share of native language speakers who are bi- or trilingual. Together, these charts reveal a clear pattern: non-Hindi speakers are generally more open to learning new languages, whereas native Hindi speakers show a lower tendency toward multilingualism.

In the south, a higher share of people opted for English as their additional language, with only a marginal increase in Hindi speakers. In contrast, in western and eastern States, the increase in English speakers was relatively modest.

English as a choice

With this pattern established, Charts 3 and 4 examine the choice of second and third languages among multilinguals in each State. Chart 3 shows the share of English speakers among native language speakers in 1991 and 2011. For example, in Tamil Nadu, 13.5% of native Tamil speakers also spoke English in 1991, a figure that rose to 18.5% by 2011. In contrast, in Haryana, the share of native Hindi speakers who also spoke English declined from 17.5% to 14.6% over the same period.

A similar trend of declining or stagnating English proficiency can be observed across several Hindi-belt States, while non-Hindi-speaking States saw an increase in English speakers. Notably, the sharpest rise in English proficiency occurred in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Punjab, whereas the increase was more modest in States like Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Chart 4 shows the share of Hindi speakers among native language speakers in each State between 1991 and 2011. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, only 0.5% of native Tamil speakers also spoke Hindi in 1991, a figure that rose slightly to 1.3% in 2011. In Karnataka, the share of native Kannada speakers who also spoke Hindi remained stagnant at around 8.5% across both years.

In contrast, the share of native language speakers who also spoke Hindi saw a significant increase in Gujarat and Maharashtra. In Gujarat, the proportion of native Gujarati speakers who also spoke Hindi rose from 21.6% in 1991 to 39% in 2011. A similar trend was observed in Maharashtra, where the share of native Marathi speakers who also spoke Hindi grew from 35.7% to 43.5%.

Charts 3 and 4 establish another clear pattern: the choice of second and third languages varied significantly across non-Hindi-speaking States. In the southern States, a higher proportion of people opted for English as their additional language, with only a marginal increase in Hindi speakers. In contrast, in western and eastern States, the increase in English speakers was relatively modest, while the number of people acquiring Hindi grew significantly.

This divergence helps explain why resistance to Hindi is more pronounced in the southern States, while opposition remains more muted in other regions.

Hindi or English

This brings us back to the core utilitarian question: which language best equips citizens in their pursuit of better opportunities? A comparison of Human Development Index (HDI) scores across States and Union Territories reveals a clear trend — regions with a higher share of English speakers tend to have higher HDI scores (Chart 5), while States with a greater proportion of Hindi speakers generally exhibit lower HDI scores (Chart 6). This suggests a positive correlation between a higher standard of living and a greater prevalence of English proficiency.

Migration data further reinforces this pattern. Reports from the Economic Advisory Council to the PM and the Multiple Indicator Survey indicate that a significant number of people from Hindi-speaking States are moving to non-Hindi-speaking regions in search of better economic opportunities. This trend suggests that States with higher English proficiency and better development indicators are attracting more migrants — another factor which bats for English to be the link language and not Hindi.

CHART 1: The chart presents the share of monolinguals — individuals who speak only their native language (first language/mother tongue) — across select States. ● 1991 ● 2011

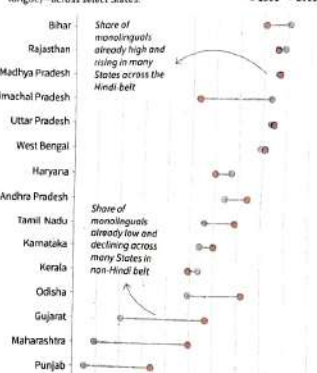


CHART 2: The chart presents the share of bi/trilinguals — individuals who speak at least one language other than their native language (first language/mother tongue) — across select States. ● 1991 ● 2011

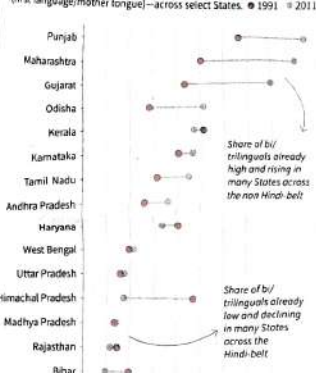


CHART 3: The chart shows the share of English speakers among native language speakers. ● 1991 ● 2011

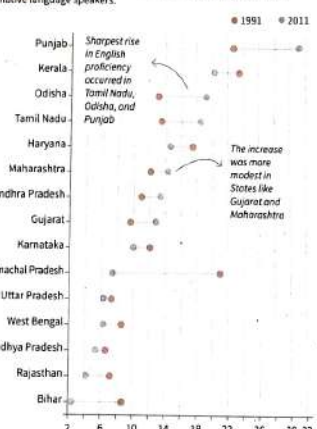
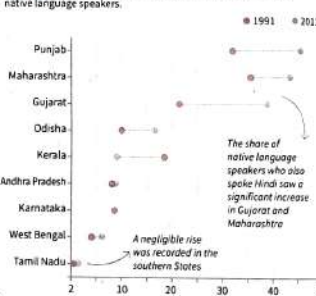


CHART 4: The chart shows the share of Hindi speakers among native language speakers. ● 1991 ● 2011



Notes: In Charts 1, 2, 3, and 4, only speakers of the majority native language in each State were considered for analysis, excluding those who spoke other languages. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, the analysis focused solely on individuals who identified Tamil as their first language. These speakers accounted for 86.7% of the State's population in 1991 and 88.4% in 2011.

Source: Language census and the Global Data Lab

CHART 5: The chart plots the share of Hindi speakers in 2011 against the HDI scores in 2022. The bigger the dot, the higher the population in the State

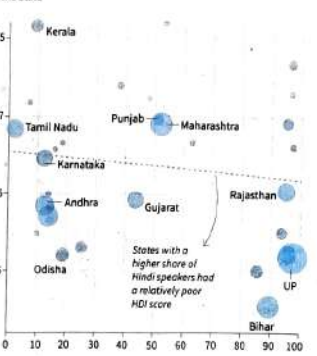
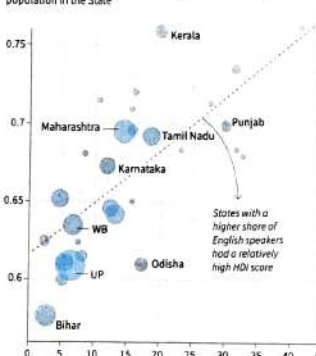


CHART 6: The chart plots the share of English speakers in 2011 against the HDI scores in 2022. The bigger the dot, the higher the population in the State



A. Joseph Dorairaj

These days, words like 'skilling,' 'up-skilling' and 'reskilling' reverberate in the corridors of higher educational institutions. The recent push towards skilling and vocational education has reignited the debate on liberal versus vocational education highlighting the academic-vocational divide.

Development

In 387 BCE, Plato's academy in Athens – considered the prototype of a modern university – focussed on elenchus and dialectics. The aim was to train youth to be aware of inbuilt contradictions and inconsistencies in discourses and to direct their thinking in terms of contraries. Aristotle, an alumnus, continued this tradition with his Lyceum, established in 334 BCE.

In modern times, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the architect of Berlin University founded in 1810, proclaimed that a university had a dual mandate: teaching and undertaking research. The Humboldtian model of a university as a research-intensive institution is being followed in the West currently.

John Newman, in his *The Idea of a University* (1852) argued that knowledge is its own end. Liberal education, according to him, is the

Going beyond skills

Should higher educational institutions, especially universities, teach and pursue research or engage in skill development?

KNOWLEDGE

"process of training, by which the intellect – instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science – is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture". He pointed out that liberal education enables students to have "a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life". He made a valuable distinction between liberal knowledge and useful knowledge, and correlated liberal knowledge with university education.

In recent times, India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) categorised higher educational institutions into three clusters: research-intensive universities, teaching-intensive universities, and autonomous colleges vested with the power to award degrees. All three are called upon to focus on teaching and research, but at different levels.

Skills gap

Today, CEOs of reputed companies lament the skills gap in students despite them having gone through undergraduate (and, in some cases, postgraduate) studies and are desperate to close the gap to get hold of industry fit

workers. To achieve this, a generous dose of vocational education is recommended so that students are also trained in skills through certificates and diplomas in addition to their degree. The UGC document, "Guidelines for Introduction of Bachelor of Vocation (B.Voc.) Programme in Universities and Colleges under the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF). 2015" mirrors this changing situation: "It has been a long-felt necessity to align higher education with the emerging needs of the economy so as to ensure that the graduates of higher education system have adequate knowledge and skills for

employment and entrepreneurship." Accordingly, three skill development schemes have been introduced: Community College, B.Voc. Degree Programme, and Deen Dayal Upadhyay Kaushal Kendras (DDUKKs).

Should higher educational institutions, especially universities, teach and pursue research or engage in skill development? While some argue that the Humboldtian model should not be tampered with, others point out that universities should meet industry requirements and focus on skill-development. A few others, adopting a pragmatic stance, point out that universities should do

both – teach and pursue higher-order research and also prepare students to secure gainful employment.

Colleges and universities should train students to think analytically and equip them with the skills to translate concepts and ideas into action. This will ensure the connection between classrooms and the real world so that concepts and theories can be applied in real life and real-world issues are also discussed in classrooms for viable solutions.

Job descriptions are vital. Let universities and postgraduate colleges relentlessly pursue research in addition to teaching. They should

not be burdened with skill development though students should acquire the skills of transforming and crystallising thoughts into action. Let Community Colleges, ITIs and DDUKs and, to some extent, undergraduate colleges take up skill development in a full-fledged manner.

But, even here, a dose of liberal education is required; for, ultimately, the purpose of higher education is to enhance students' intellectual capacities. Diluting the mandate of higher educational institutions for short-term gains and converting them into skill developers and managers would be detrimental in the long-run. An excessive focus on skill development will eventually lead to an impoverished intellectual climate in higher educational institutions, especially in universities.

Different categories of institutions should adhere to their respective mandates and their roles and responsibilities should not be diluted or mixed up. An entire generation brought up largely on skill development may not be endowed with corresponding cognitive and meta-cognitive competencies, which would be a recipe for disaster.

The writer is Emeritus Professor, Gandhigram Rural Institute. Deemed-to-be University, Tamil Nadu

SCHOLARSHIPS

Wells Mountain Foundation Scholarship

Provided by Wells Mountain Initiative (WMI). **Eligibility:** Those applying to or currently enrolled in their first UG degree and plan to live and work in their home country after graduation and show financial need. Prior participation in volunteering and a commitment towards it during the period of studies is required.

Rewards: Up to \$3,000 per annum.

Application: Online

Deadline: March 1

www.b4s.in/edge/WMFSl

Inlaks Shivdasani Scholarships

Offered by the non-profit Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation.

Eligibility: Open to Indian passport holders who have a first-class or equivalent degree from recognised Indian institutions and have scored 65% or equivalent in Arts-related subjects; and 70% or equivalent in Maths and Science-related subjects and have received a valid deferred offer letter for the current academic year and hold an English language certification.

Rewards: \$1,00,000 and other benefits (one-time).

Application: Online

Deadline: March 31

www.b4s.in/edge/INLAKSI

SBI Asha Scholarship for Overseas Education

An initiative of the SBI Foundation under its Integrated Learning Mission (ILM).

Eligibility: Indian students belonging to SC and ST categories pursuing a Master's or PG course (any year) at a premier institution outside India and have secured at least 75% or above in their previous academic year. Annual family income should be ₹600,000.

Rewards: Up to ₹20,00,000 or 50% of course-related expenses (whichever is less)

Application: Online

Deadline: March 31

www.b4s.in/edge/SBIFS12

Courtesy: buddystudy.com

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Learning from DeepSeek, honing India's AI strategy

The first two months of 2025 have been eventful in the world of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In January, the release of DeepSeek's R1 model shook the AI world. Then in February, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, along with French President Emmanuel Macron, co-chaired the Paris AI Action Summit where United States (US) Vice President JD Vance emphasised the geopolitical and security implications of the AI race. Finally, PM Modi's recent visit to the US saw the launch of the re-branded TRUST initiative for US-India cooperation on critical technologies such as AI.

What do these developments imply for India's quest for AI leadership? The discussion in India in the aftermath of the shake-up caused by DeepSeek has been on ensuring the availability of AI chips and accelerating attempts to build a sovereign Large Language Model (LLM). The government has announced that India will be developing its own LLM within the next few months and that the National AI Mission has already made over 10,000 GPUs available to startups and researchers. India AI Mission also put out a call for proposals to build foundational AI models, including LLMs and Small-Language Models (SLMs).

While the quick movement on this front is laudable, these are not the only — or even the most important — action items to prioritise post DeepSeek's success. Sure enough, DeepSeek has demonstrated its ability as a competitor to ChatGPT and others at a much lower training cost than its American counterparts. This is an encouraging development for a country like India that champions frugal innovation.

But it doesn't mean that the first, or only, logical next step for India is to build its own LLM. DeepSeek's main contribution is that it has come up with a differentiated approach to training an LLM vis-a-vis its US and European competitors. The lower training cost is a result of that research-backed innovative approach.

There are three major learnings for India's tech leaders and policymakers here. First, India should prioritise putting in place all the building blocks necessary to innovate in AI. For that, plugging some fundamental gaps in India's AI ecosystem — top-tier AI talent, unique datasets and advanced research and development (R&D) — will be critical. India today doesn't have the top-tier AI talent that the US or China boast of. Most Indian-origin talent in AI is unfortunately still working in Silicon Valley. Aravind Srinivas of Perplexity AI is happy to contribute funds to those working in AI in India, but not willing to move back to India. That's the logical decision for him given Perplexity AI's leading position in the US. But it makes clear that India will need to find ways to plug this AI brain drain.

India also needs to build a clear strategy to leverage its data-rich tech ecosystem. While

India's tech platforms, including UPI, are generating large volumes of India-specific data, Indian AI startups have not been able to build atop these datasets yet. Many other such datasets unique to India remain locked within silos. India will need to find ways to unlock this for domestic AI startups to build upon.

Similarly, India's AI R&D ecosystem will need a major boost. During PM Modi's US visit, a key partnership was announced between India's recently launched Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) and the US' National Science Foundation. But India also needs to boost private and public funding of its AI research ecosystem domestically, including its recently established AI Centres of Excellence, to raise the likelihood of truly innovative AI developments (like DeepSeek) coming out of India.

India must focus on first putting together these key building blocks to achieve true innovations in AI. The outcome, then, of putting these building blocks in place could be in the form of a more efficiently trained LLM (like DeepSeek's R1) or something else altogether that is truly innovative. That will help India truly command respect in the global AI ecosystem.

Second, India must put its weight behind open source innovation in AI. There is a big debate raging globally about open source/open weight models versus closed source/closed weight models. Open source LLMs, like DeepSeek's R1 model, Mistral, and others, are currently locked in a battle with closed source LLMs such as ChatGPT.

Many companies, notably France's Mistral, the US' Meta and now, China's DeepSeek, have put their weight behind open source. India must also. Open source advantages Indian startups and researchers attempting to compete in AI, whereas closed source AI ecosystems will further deepen India's dependence on foreign AI systems. India will find common cause with Europe and other countries in the Global South on this, as they would similarly benefit from an open source AI ecosystem.

Third, India must shift its focus much more to building AI competitiveness for now, rather than being overly focused on shaping global AI safety rules. At the Paris AI Summit, Vance explicitly outlined the US' worldview on AI: In the high-stakes competition with China for AI leadership, it simply wants to win. In such a highly charged global race for AI leadership, India must shift its focus to building a competitive niche in the AI race. This is not to say that India shouldn't continue pursuing global compacts on AI safety and building domestic guardrails; it should, but without losing focus on building national competitiveness in AI.

Indian policymakers and tech leaders must realise that the US-China race over AI leadership will leave us behind if we don't understand the fast-evolving contours of this game. Europe is also learning this lesson the hard way. To be relevant in this game, India will urgently need to devise the right strategy to boost its AI talent and AI R&D centres of excellence and leverage its unique datasets to contribute to the fast-paced AI innovation ecosystem. Only then will the world sit up and take notice of India in The Great AI Game.



Anirudh Suri

INDIA MUST PUT ITS WEIGHT BEHIND OPEN SOURCE INNOVATION IN AI. THIS WILL HELP INDIAN STARTUPS COMPETE, WHILE CLOSED SOURCE AI WILL DEEPEN DEPENDENCE ON FOREIGN AI SYSTEMS

Anirudh Suri is managing director, India Internet Fund, a non-resident scholar at Carnegie India and author of *The Great Tech Game*. The views expressed are personal

There is no easy remedy for student suicide

Campus requiem

SUKANTA CHAUDHURI

Every year, some 13,000 students in India take their own lives, nearly twice the already disturbing number a decade ago. The first seven weeks of 2025 saw seven deaths in Kota's coaching centres, plus two widely publicized ones elsewhere. Given the annual figures, the greater number are clearly never publicized.

Not all student suicides relate to studies or campus life. (Has anyone compared suicide figures for students and non-students of this age group?) Some cases result from personal issues like disappointed love or ill health. Many more are due to conflicts with parents and family, often for entirely private reasons. But here, the personal sphere starts to merge with the academic.

In all such deaths, we are overcome with sympathy for the bereaved parents. Yet the academic compulsions leading to disaster commonly start early in a child's life, inculcated by the parents' unrealistic ambitions on their offspring's behalf. When many children so conditioned from infancy meet in school, it creates a hotbed of peer pressure intensifying over the years. Classmates are not friends: they are competitors. Flouting all professional principles, teachers commonly aggravate the process, or are themselves under pressure to do so by authorities pandering to the parental clientele.

Of the untold resultant damage, suicide is only the most extreme. Those who win the race, no less than those who fall behind, are scarred in countless ways, sometimes for life. There are different factors behind the stress and desperation of aspirants swotting to enter the system, new entrants just past the door, and those midway through the course. Each stage takes a toll that weakens the victim's resilience for the next.

The educational order is crumbling as we watch. The 10+2 structure of the core schooling system has lost out to the IIT-JEE and NEET and now, it seems, to the Common University Entrance Test for general degree courses. Ghost secondary schools enrol students on the understanding that they will not attend classes but instead go to coaching centres for all-India admission tests. Those confining themselves from choice or circumstance to the board exams risk missing out on the great Indian dream. Yet those passing through those pearly gates are losers no less, forfeiting much else. Some remain hap-



pily oblivious of the loss. Others feel it at various levels — at its direst, destroying life itself.

Our educational planning embodies a warped value system. It is not hard to appreciate that education is a common good: society and the economy can flourish only if all citizens receive an adequate education. Yet aspiring India is committed to viewing education as a private good benefiting only the individual who receives it. This philosophy favours the galloping privatization of education, with colossal waste of untapped human resources among those who cannot afford it. At the individual level, it leaves every student frighteningly alone. If their careers benefit no one but themselves, why should anyone else care about them?

The word 'college' comes from the same root as 'collect'. It basically means a group or community sharing a common purpose — here, the pursuit of knowledge. If knowledge is subordinated to individual success, there is no common purpose. In a disastrous development that India will come to rue, knowledge as such is being discredited. I do not say this from unreal intellectual idealism. Of course people want jobs after college, and most of them will look no further. But in the process, they acquire an awareness of the expanse of knowledge that lies beyond, while some explore that

terrain all their lives. That foundational research is the cornerstone of a knowledge economy, a term trivialized by our planners.

Shared entry into the world of knowledge is or should be the binding force of a student community. So, of course, are shared co-curricular activities, hostel life, and simply time spent together. With whatever imperfections, this shared ambience was a reality in the now waning public university system — the only arena when Indian citizens shared a common agenda across social divides.

A young teacher at an elite private university was talking about the loneliness and alienation of her students, charting their solitary courses through the common curriculum, with inevitable problems of substance abuse and mental health. I have heard many such accounts. The malaise has spread to public universities, whose students are imbued with the same ethos but still more frustrated to uphold it in their languishing institutions.

This may explain a new savagery infusing the old evil of ragging, that classic cause of student suicides. It was repugnant enough earlier as a rite of passage, most prevalent in engineering and medical schools where entry was most prized. There now seems to be a new latent frustration in the seniors inflicting torture, a violence born less of enti-

tlement than insecurity. They seek self-assurance by exercising brute power over their juniors, as they might over women or less privileged castes.

There is no easy remedy. Mechanical devices like fans from which one can't hang oneself would be frivolous in another context. Counselling might be a palliative but is hardly a solution. Teachers might, indeed must, do more to reach out to their students, but they can manage only so much given staff-student ratios, the pressure of their own research, and all too often the burden of administrative work. Radical structural change is the only solution: in particular, rehabilitating the public university system and, within it, institutions run by state governments that are the only resort for the talented underprivileged. This year's Union education budget raised the allocation for IITs still further beyond all other institutions. Our youth are being forced into a stampede to dance on the point of a needle.

Our education system magnifies the general malaise of our governance, to focus on publicity and the harvest of a few shiny low-hanging fruit while the rest rot or wither on the tree. Until we tend the whole grove, the nation will be starved of human resources, while countless youths die in spirit and some, heart-rendingly, in the body.

An education for the real world

New UGC guidelines will address disconnect between academia and industry, bridge the gap between universities and job market



MAMIDALA JAGADESH KUMAR

FOR A LONG time, the inability of Indian higher educational institutions (HEIs) to integrate job-oriented skill courses in BA, BCom, and BSc programmes — these attract a significant share of students in higher education — has significantly impacted the employability of graduates. Outdated curricula, regulatory inertia and a substantial disconnect between academia and industry were the immediate reasons for this shortcoming. However, with the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, regulators such as the UGC are facilitating transformation in higher education through innovative regulations, frameworks and guidelines.

Recently, the UGC announced comprehensive guidelines to incorporate skill-based education and micro/nano-credentials as part of the degree programmes offered by HEIs. These guidelines, aligned with NEP 2020, extoll skill and experiential education, aim to overhaul the conventional educational framework and bridge the gap between academic learning and the job market.

The most reasonable path for students to seize opportunities in high-demand and emerging areas is by acquiring credits in skill-based courses as part of their regular degree programmes. This enhances employability without burdening the students with extra academic stress.

A core feature of the UGC guidelines is permitting students to plan their learning by designing personalised educational journeys and earning stackable credits by choosing courses from academic disciplines and skill domains through the National Credit Framework (NCrF). The guidelines allow students to earn micro/nano-credentials through flexible and multidisciplinary learning pathways. Incorporating micro/nano-credentials in regular degree programmes is a progressive way to provide targeted skill development opportunities to students specialising in specific competencies.

UGC guidelines advise that Indian enterprises or multinational corporations (MNCs) who desire to offer skill-based courses can submit their proposals to the UGC. A committee comprising subject experts and industry representatives will evaluate the proposals based on their adherence to UGC guidelines and quality standards. Courses approved by the UGC are listed on the SWAYAM Plus platform and linked to the academic bank of credits, making them accessible to students nationwide.

The UGC's comprehensive assessment framework for skill-based courses and micro-credentials emphasises a structured, multi-tiered approach to evaluating students' competencies through internal and external assessments. Its guidelines recommend diverse areas for skill-based courses and micro-credentials. The principal areas advised by the UGC include advanced tech-

nologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, machine learning, cybersecurity, robotics, and data analytics courses. These will equip students with skills in high-demand sectors.

Skill-based courses in traditional crafts, textiles, tourism and hospitality management programmes could support regional economic growth in areas with a rich cultural heritage. Micro-credentials in communication, leadership, and entrepreneurship ensure students develop essential soft skills, enabling success in diverse professional environments.

The UGC guidelines encourage HEIs to align their skill-related courses with national priorities and local strengths. These institutions must, therefore, identify specific industry demands in their area and choose skill-based courses accordingly. For example, institutions in regions with agricultural sectors might offer agri-tech or sustainable farming courses, while those in financial hubs could focus on fin-tech-related courses. By using the localised approach, HEIs could ensure their education aligns with regional economic development. The adoption of these guidelines by HEIs could place Indian higher education on par with international standards by adopting global best practices in competency-based evaluation, blended learning, and collaborative assessments and ensuring that Indian graduates are globally competitive.

A closer examination of the challenges of graduate unemployability today provides a deeper sense of why skill-based courses must be an integral part of degree programmes. Regrettably, some academicians stick to an archaic view of higher education as a purely academic pursuit rather than a possibility for making students career-ready. Because of unjustified misconceptions, they view the introduction of skill-based education as a dilution of the intellectual scope of traditional degree programmes, perpetuating an elitist mindset that prioritises theoretical knowledge over practical application. Their resistance to change in higher education harms students and undermines India's progress. The understanding that it is impossible to carry on one's way into the future with a stagnant educational framework should caution us to the necessity of transforming higher education.

Considering the potential of skill-based courses to enhance student employability, more Indian HEIs must operate with accountability for the outcomes of their graduates. HEI administrators must work toward creating value for our students. They should remain concerned about whether students secure employment after completing their degrees or if they are forcing the students to pursue costly additional training to become employable. To overcome the existing mindset that constrains pragmatism, HEIs must rethink curricula, restructure faculty roles, and speedily integrate industry-relevant skill-based courses into regular degree programmes. As much as it challenges HEIs to free themselves from the conventional way of imparting education, this approach has real value. One thing is clear: HEIs must realise that our students deserve more than obsolete degrees. They merit an education that invigorates them to succeed in the real world.

The writer is chairman, UGC and former VC, JNU. Views are personal

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NEP's three-language policy isn't about Hindi imposition

We consider all Indian languages as soul of *Bharatiyata* and the link to a better future for the country.' These words of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi symbolise the core of the transformative National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. By ensuring foremost priority to one's mother tongue and regional languages, NEP 2020 conclusively strengthens cooperative federalism. Fabricating fictitious north-south fault lines for political profit and blatantly peddling false narratives like Hindi imposition is divisive federalism.

NEP 2020, like the earlier education policies of 1968 and 1986, follows the three-language policy. But the similarity absolutely ends there. Under the 1968 and 1986 policies, students in non-Hindi speaking states were compelled to take Hindi as the third language. But now under NEP 2020, the students are empowered to choose any regional language of their choice. The defining difference is that NEP 2020 progressively leaves the choice of the third language to the states, regions and students. This is a momentous shift in our educational policy to foster linguistic diversity in our nation. Rinsing and repeating false binaries and strawman arguments like Hindi imposition to mislead and manipulate will not work anymore. We live in a digital age where one can effectively fact check malicious misinformation. In the 65-page NEP 2020 document, while Hindi is just mentioned once, regional languages like Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada and Odia are mentioned more times.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) often raises the bogey of the rights and autonomy of state governments being impeded and eroded by the Centre. Education was originally in the State List of the Constitution. It was during the Emergency that education was moved to the Concurrent List, through the 42nd Amendment. Currently, Congress-led governments in Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka follow the three-language policy.

In 1968, the DMK government vehemently attacked and boycotted the three-language policy and since then, Tamil Nadu, regardless of the party in office, has followed the two-language policy. Today, the number of students in private schools in Tamil Nadu are higher than those in government schools. If the present state government deems it so detrimental and harmful, why are many private schools in the state still following the three-language policy? Is this not ideological dilution?

The dubious dichotomy in Tamil Nadu is that while students in many private school boards benefit from studying a third language of their choice, the disadvantaged government school students are being deprived of this option. Why is the DMK which touts its Dravida model of governance, denying government school students the valuable chance to learn great Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannada or Malayalam? When learning a third language is the preserve of just the privileged class in private schools, how can that be true social justice?

Tamil, one the world's most ancient languages and its illustrious cultural legacy, have a special place in PM Modi's heart. Be it honouring Mahakavi Subramania Bharati's birth anniversary by celebrating it as National Language Day, installing the sacred *sengol* in the new Parliament, showcasing the historic Kashi and Saurashtra Tamil Sangamams, the publication of *Thirukural* translations in 13 Indian languages or setting up Thiruvalluvar cultural centres across the globe, the Modi government has exhibited unswerving commitment to respecting Tamil heritage.

PM Modi recognises a civilisational connect in every Indian language. A significant moment during his 2023 Independence Day address was when he thanked the Supreme Court for its decision to provide the operative part of their judgements in regional languages. Under Modi's leadership, fostering inclusivity by preserving Indian languages has received a great fillip. We saw Kashmiri and Dogri being recognised as official languages in Jammu & Kashmir, following the abrogation of Article 370. Classical language status has been recently conferred upon Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali. The PM has given a clarion call to provide medical, engineering and technical education in vernacular languages. Competitive exams such as JEE, NEET, and CUET are now conducted in 13 regional languages, and engineering courses are available in eight.

The visionary NEP 2020 by steadfastly prioritising one's mother tongue and regional languages, fortifies national integration. NEP 2020 is playing a pivotal role in India's journey of becoming a developed nation. Placing public good ahead of political fear-mongering will help substantially in securing a brighter future for our youth, the driving force of our nation.



CR
Kesavan

CR Kesavan is a national spokesperson of the BJP. The views expressed are personal

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Emerging from the Shadows



SACHCHIDANAND JOSHI

India's anthropology must move beyond colonial distortions to reclaim its intellectual heritage, drawing from the Upanishadic ideal of unity in knowing and being to develop an indigenous epistemology

The knower, the known, and the act of knowing are one." In this timeless utterance from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, India's ancient wisdom unveils a profound truth: the study of humanity is not a detached observation but an intimate unity of experience, understanding, and being. This non-dualistic vision—where the observer, the observed, and the act of observation dissolve into oneness—stands as a cornerstone of India's intellectual heritage. It whispers of an anthropology that transcends the fragmented, objectifying lens imposed during centuries of British subjugation (1858–1947), when Western scholars reduced India to a mere specimen of the "other." Today, as India reclaims its voice, this Upanishadic insight beckons a rewriting of anthropology—not as a borrowed Western science, but as a living tradition rooted in the subcontinent's own soil. Drawing from ancient sagas to modern thinkers like MN Srinivas, this essay critiques the colonial distortions of Indian anthropology and envisions a discipline that reflects India's pluralistic ethos, guided by institutions like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts through its pioneering divisions.

Under British rule, India became a laboratory for Western anthropology, shaped by imperial agendas. Herbert Risley, in the 1901 Census, declared, "The caste system is the natural outcome of the



Indian anthropology beyond the West is a journey inward, guided by the Upanishadic truth that knowing is being

interaction of the Aryan race with the inferior aboriginal tribes," casting India's social complexity into a racial mold that served colonial hierarchies. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism further froze Indian villages into static systems, stripping them of historical dynamism. As Bernard S Cohn observed, "The British conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge as much as it was a conquest of land." Censuses, surveys, and ethnographic treatises were tools of governance, not understanding, painting India as a land of superstition and stagnation.

Even after independence, these Western frameworks lingered. Indian anthropologists, trained in Malinowski's fieldwork or Durkheim's theories, often sidelined indigenous epistemologies, perpetuating a narrative that clashed with the

Upanishadic unity of knowing and being. This colonial legacy demands reevaluation, a return to India's own ways of seeing humanity. Long before anthropology emerged as a Western discipline, India nurtured a holistic tradition of studying human life. The Rigveda (c. 1500 BCE) muses, "Man is born of the earth, sustained by the earth, and returns to the earth," weaving humanity into the fabric of nature. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* asserts, "The root of happiness is Dharma; the root of Dharma is wealth; the root of wealth is power; and the root of power is conquest over the senses," blending ethics, economics, and psychology into a pragmatic social science. Abhinavagupta adds, "The self is the mirror of the universe" (*Tantraloka*), offering a relational view that defies Western dualisms.

These were not abstract

musings but systematic inquiries into existence—anthropologies of experience, not mere classification. They stand in stark contrast to the colonial gaze, which sought to dissect rather than connect, and they lay the foundation for a reimagined Indian anthropology.

Post-independence, Indian scholars began to loosen the colonial yoke. MN Srinivas, in *The Remembered Village* (1976), wrote, "The anthropologist's strength lies in his ability to see the large in the small," grounding his study of caste in lived realities rather than imported abstractions. His concept of Sanskritization recast caste as a fluid process, not a fossilized structure. AR Desai, in *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1948), exposed the economic violence of British rule: "British rule destroyed the self-sufficient village economy, turning artisans into paupers and peasants into laborers." His work infused anthropology with historical depth, challenging Western ahistorical models.

These efforts reflect a growing assertion of India's intellectual agency, aligning with the Upanishadic ideal of unity in understanding—a synthesis of past and present, local and universal.

Modern scholars amplify this call, institutions like Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts exemplifies this shift through its divisions like Janapada Sampada and Kala Nidhi. Janapada Sampada, dedicated to folk and

janjatiya lifestyles, documents India's living cultures with a reverence for their interdependence with nature and society—echoing the Rigveda's ecological harmony. Kala Nidhi, a vast archive of texts and artifacts, preserves India's cultural knowledge, offering a repository for rethinking human experience beyond Western categories. These initiatives embody a vision of anthropology as a dynamic, participatory tradition, not a sterile import, quietly urging a return to India's own epistemic roots. To transcend Western frameworks, Indian anthropology must embrace its own voices—janjatiya narratives, regional languages, and oral histories. With over 1,600 languages, India's linguistic diversity offers a rich tapestry for theory-building, unshackled from English-centric models.

Indian anthropology beyond the West is a journey inward, guided by the Upanishadic truth that knowing is being. From the Rigveda's ecological wisdom to Srinivas' village insights, it weaves a discipline that honors India's past while shaping its future. Institutions and scholars through their quiet yet profound work, light the path—offering not just a critique of colonial shadows, but a radiant vision of anthropology as India's gift to itself and the world.

The writer is a distinguished literary figure and serves as the Member Secretary of IGNCA. Views expressed are personal

Sachin Joshi

With over 1,600 languages, India's linguistic diversity offers a rich tapestry for theory-building, unshackled from English-centric models

Declining trend in PhD enrolment hampering research ecosystem

BIJU DHARMAPALAN

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 couldn't find quality candidates from those who have qualified for national-level tests like CSIR, GATE, etc.

This trend could have far-reaching consequences for the country's research ecosystem and global competitiveness if left unchecked. Doctoral education is pivotal in knowledge creation, 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, post-doctoral fellows, and junior researchers—form the backbone of these institutions. They drive experimental work, data analysis, and the continuous pursuit of new knowledge. Without these people, none of our scientific institutions could survive even for a day.

Moreover, India's research output is already lower than that of global leaders. As per the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), India ranked 9th globally in terms of research publications in 2022. However, the quality of publications, as measured by citation impact, remains below that of countries like the US, China, and Germany. A decline in PhD enrolments will only exacerbate this issue, leading to a weaker research foundation and fewer high-impact studies.

A major contributing factor is the lack of adequate financial incentives

and job security for PhD holders. Research scholars often struggle with inadequate stipends that do not match the rising cost of living. While the government provides research fellowships through bodies such as the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the University Grants Commission (UGC), these funds are often delayed, causing distress among students. The research output from many Indian institutions is increasingly becoming disconnected from industry needs and global trends. A significant portion of PhD research remains confined to theoretical explorations with limited practical applications. The lack of collaboration between academia and industry reduces the incentives for students to engage in meaningful, impactful research.

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 take a toll on their well-being. Institutions must recognize these challenges and work towards creating a supportive environment that ensures their intellectual and personal growth.

Another significant factor contributing to the current state of research is the change in attitude among present-generation youngsters. Many are less willing to endure the pain and challenges associated with PhD work, which can take four to eight years of their productive period. Their focus seems to be on smart work and higher financial returns rather than long-term intellectual pursuits. This shift in priorities is impacting the research ecosystem, with fewer individuals opting for rigorous academic research.

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.

A strong doctoral program is essential for maintaining academic excellence in universities. Fewer PhD students mean fewer research publications, reduced global rankings, and decreased funding opportunities. This, in turn, affects the credibility of national institutions, making them less attractive to international collaborations and student exchange programs. 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' (self-reliant India), making the country vulnerable to technological and economic dependencies.

The declining trend in PhD enrolment is a serious concern that needs immediate attention. If not addressed, it will severely impact India's research ecosystem, innovation potential, and global competitiveness. A multi-pronged approach involving financial reforms, policy changes, industry integration, and global collaborations is the need of the hour. By creating a robust and attractive research environment, India

can reclaim its position as a leader in knowledge creation and scientific advancements. The future of India's intellectual and technological progress depends on how effectively we tackle this challenge today.

Research scholars are not merely assistants or trainees; they are integral to the progress of research institutions. Their relentless pursuit of knowledge, innovative thinking, and dedication ensure that research continues to evolve, addressing global challenges and improving lives. Recognizing their contributions and supporting their journey is essential for the sustained advancement of science and technology. Every year, during National Science Day and Technology Day, we remember the contributions of our scientific community, but we rarely remember the actual heroes of science, the research scholars. Every policymaker must evolve a culture where our research scholars are valued and respected for building a developed nation.

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BORN IN USA, BACK IN BHARAT

US stands to lose big from birthright citizenship order. India can gain if it creates an ecosystem to retain its highly skilled talent, and absorb those who may want to return

Adya Madhavan



Trump's first action on assuming office – an executive order ending birthright citizenship – is proving to be a long legal battle before implementation. Eighteen states have sued the federal govt over the executive order.

There is also strong public disapproval – a Pew survey in end Feb found 56% of US adults disapprove of Trump's order that seeks to change who gets access to American citizenship.

The order was supposed to kick in on Feb 19, but courts have repeatedly blocked its roll-out – the latest being a Virginia appeals court. While the matter is in court, it is worth noting that one beneficiary of birthright citizenship is US itself. Diaspora communities and second-generation immigrants make up a chunk of its workforce, especially in the tech industry.

The order excludes children born under two sets of circumstances from US citizenship. First, where the mother is unlawfully present, and the father is either not a citizen of US or is not a lawful permanent resident. Second, where the mother has a temporary status – such as a student or work visa – and the father is either not a US citizen or a lawful permanent resident.

US currently offers many forms of temporary permits for employment and educational opportunities to foreign nationals. Children of foreign nationals, irrespective of their nationality and their parents' immigration status, are entitled to US citizenship.

Last year, Indian nationals made up approximately 75% of the recipients of H-1B visas, many of whom were employed in the tech industry that relies heavily on high-skilled immigrants, mostly on temporary work visas such as H-1B. Revoking birthright citizenship is a deterrent for this lot, given the uncertainty of their children's future. Tech industry is likely to face a shortfall of over a million skilled workers in years ahead. International talent is arguably the need of the hour for America.

For India, this move could be beneficial although it would interfere with aspirations of Indians looking to work in US. While some temporary visa holders would opt to work in other foreign countries with less stringent citizenship laws, this order – if passed – would increase the number of Indian professionals staying back in India.

Some of India's best minds in fields such as medicine and engineering graduate from Indian universities and work in US. Driving factors are better pay and potential for children to grow up in US and access better education and infra that a US citizenship is perceived to bring with it. Bright young Indians who head to US for higher studies on temporary permits are driven by similar aspirations. Revoking birthright citizenship could lead to an influx of skilled professionals – something India has been attempting to achieve but has struggled with. This reverse brain drain could bolster India's tech industry that's already projected to grow, allowing India to position itself as a more significant player globally.

India now has a booming startup ecosystem, with cities such as Bengaluru and Mumbai serving as centres for innovation that could generate jobs for Indians who return or choose to stay back. Moreover, Indian companies too offer competitive salaries, and Bengaluru is known for offering large salary packages to junior- to mid-level employees in the tech industry. Govt also is actively promoting the return of NRIs to India and is promoting jobs in emerging sectors such as clean energy and fintech.

In order to access skilled talent, US companies may

resort to establishing or expanding their operations in India, which can foster bilateral tech collaborations. India is currently home to many Global Capability Centres (GCCs), such as the Microsoft India Development Centre and Goldman Sachs Services India, which are important components of these corporations' operations. With a decrease in foreign tech talent in US, there is likely to be an increase in the number of GCCs, and those already established could scale up.

While the number of GCCs may hurt India's IT and tech firms, the overall number of skilled professionals would benefit the country. Indian tech firms could have many more outsourcing and partnership opportunities headed their way. Currently, India has also struggled to establish itself as a leading player in fields such as AI, blockchain, and quantum computing. The increase in skilled professionals who would remain in the country will likely grow India's high-tech capabilities.

In the long run, increased demand for local opportunities could catalyse the expansion of India's tech-training ecosystem. This would be beneficial for the Indian economy as well, as it would increase the tax-paying population.

Even if the order is finally implemented, it may not be the worst outcome for India. Whether costs for the American tech industry were an outcome that Trump accounted for when he signed the executive order remains to be seen, but it could prove to be beneficial for India. America's talent lost may turn out to be India's brain gain.

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TSD 16

हिंदी के विरुद्ध फिर क्यों उठी आवाज़

पूनम पाण्डे

तीन भाषा नीति को लेकर तमिलनाडु में फिर से हिंदी विरोध की राजनीति गरमा गई है। नई शिक्षा नीति के तीन भाषा फॉर्म्युले के जरिए तमिलनाडु सरकार लगातार केंद्र सरकार और BJP पर हिंदी थोपने का आरोप लगा रही है। तमिलनाडु को केंद्र सरकार से सर्व शिक्षा अभियान के तहत फंड नहीं मिला। वहां के मुख्यमंत्री एम के स्टालिन ने प्रधानमंत्री नरेंद्र मोदी को पत्र लिखकर आरोप लगाया है कि राज्य के 2,152 करोड़ रुपये जारी नहीं किए गए हैं। उन्होंने यह पैसा जारी करने की मांग की। दरअसल, फंड के लिए राज्यों को नई शिक्षा नीति के प्रावधान लागू करने हैं, जिनमें तीन भाषा नीति भी शामिल है।

नया नहीं है विरोध

तमिलनाडु में शुरू से तीन भाषा नीति का विरोध होता रहा है। 1968 में जब यह फॉर्म्युला लागू हुआ, तब भी हिंदी थोपने की बात कहते हुए तमिलनाडु ने इसे लागू नहीं किया। राज्य में अभी दो भाषा नीति ही लागू है। वहां स्टूडेंट्स को तमिल और इंग्लिश पढ़ाई जाती है। जब केंद्र सरकार की नई एजुकेशन पॉलिसी का ड्राफ्ट सामने आया था, तब भी हिंदी थोपने का आरोप लगाते हुए सबसे ज्यादा विरोध तमिलनाडु में हुआ था। तब केंद्रीय शिक्षा मंत्री को सफाई भी देनी पड़ी थी और फिर ड्राफ्ट की कुछ लाइनों में बदलाव भी हुआ था। नई शिक्षा नीति में कहा गया है कि एक मातृभाषा या क्षेत्रीय भाषा, दूसरी कोई अन्य भारतीय भाषा और तीसरी अंग्रेजी या कोई अन्य विदेशी भाषा होनी चाहिए। तमिलनाडु में हिंदी विरोध वैसे भी वहां की राजनीति में अहम रहा है। 1960 के दशक में हुए आंदोलन के पीछे भी



**विशुद्ध
राजनीति**
कसौटी

वजह राजनीतिक ही थी। तब हिंदी विरोध के रूप में वहां के क्षेत्रीय नेताओं को एक ऐसा मुद्दा मिला, जिसने तमिलनाडु में द्रविड़ राजनीतिक दलों की नींव रखने का काम किया। 1965 में हुए इस आंदोलन ने द्रविड़ अस्मिता का सवाल उठाया और दो साल बाद ही DMK सत्ता में आ गई। तभी से वहां द्रविड़ अस्मिता और भाषा मुद्दा बनती रही है।

तीन भाषा नीति का हालिया विरोध ऐसे वक्त में हो रहा है, जब दक्षिण के राज्य परिसीमन को लेकर भी सवाल उठा रहे हैं। उन्हें डर है कि परिसीमन होने पर लोकसभा में दक्षिण के राज्यों की सीटें कम हो सकती हैं, जिससे केंद्र में उनकी आवाज कमजोर हो जाएगी। ऐसे में परिसीमन और हिंदी का विरोध एक साथ चल रहा है और दोनों एक-दूसरे को मजबूती दे रहे हैं। दरअसल, परिसीमन के बाद लोकसभा और विधानसभा की सीटों में बदलाव होगा। जनसंख्या के लिहाज से उत्तर भारत का पलड़ा भारी है। दक्षिण भारत के राज्यों को यही डर है कि जनसंख्या नियंत्रण पर बेहतर काम का उन्हें नुकसान न उठाना पड़े।

वैसे गृहमंत्री अमित शाह कह चुके हैं कि परिसीमन में दक्षिण भारत के राज्यों की सीटें कम नहीं होंगी। लेकिन ऐसा होगा कैसे, यह सवाल उठाते हुए दक्षिण भारत में विरोध जारी है।

द्रविड़ अस्मिता का सवाल

BJP जब भी तमिलनाडु और दूसरे दक्षिणी राज्यों में अपनी पकड़ बनाने की कोशिश करती है, DMK सहित दूसरी पार्टियां हिंदी विरोध और द्रविड़ अस्मिता के नाम पर मैदान में उतर जाती हैं। 2019 में भी हिंदी को लेकर तमिलनाडु की क्षेत्रीय पार्टियों को BJP की घेरेबंदी का मौका मिल गया था। तब हिंदी दिवस पर अमित शाह ने कहा था कि एक भाषा होनी चाहिए जो देश का नाम दुनिया में बुलंद करे और हिंदी में यह खूबी है। इसके बाद दक्षिण के राज्यों में काफी विरोध हुआ और निशाने पर BJP और राष्ट्रीय स्वयंसेवक संघ दोनों आए। BJP के नेता हालांकि वक्त-वक्त पर कहते रहे हैं कि BJP न भाषा विरोधी पार्टी है, न दक्षिण विरोधी पार्टी। 2022 में केंद्र सरकार ने काशी-तमिल संगम की शुरुआत की। इसके जरिए काशी और तमिल को करीब लाने और दक्षिण को उत्तर भारत की सांस्कृतिक एकता से जोड़ने की कोशिश BJP कर रही है।

लेकिन तमिलनाडु में आम लोगों में हिंदी को लेकर विरोध वैसा नहीं दिखता, जैसा नेता दिखाते हैं। दक्षिण भारत के राज्यों में हिंदी के प्रचार-प्रसार के लिए 1918 में चेन्नै में दक्षिण भारत हिंदी प्रचार सभा की स्थापना की गई, जो आज भी सक्रिय है। सभा यहां हिंदी सिखाने का काम कर रही है। यहां हिंदी पढ़ने वाले तकरीबन 65 फीसदी लोग तमिल भाषी हैं। हिंदी प्रचार सभा से हिंदी सीखने वाले लोगों की संख्या लगातार बढ़ रही है। BJP नेता अब इस लाइन पर भी लोगों से बात कर रहे हैं। हालांकि इसका कितना असर होगा, यह देखना होगा।

45/10

Protecting children in the age of AI

VITIT MUNTARBHORN

The age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is very much here. The term "generative AI" is now commonplace, with the public fascinated that AI can actively produce content such as written and audio creations. In fact, the world is moving towards Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) whereby robots will be able to match and even outdo human intelligence. Aptly, its relationship with children (under 18 years) invites reflection and precaution.

On the one hand, AI can bring great benefits, building on the strengths of existing digitalization. It can be a useful educational tool, such as to help children who face learning difficulties or disabilities. It is a technology of connectivity and helps to facilitate communication and information dissemination. It can act as an instrument of leisure, such as to invent games. It can promote human efficiency, such as to deal with repetitive tasks in the medical field.

On the other hand, AI also brings risks. It might be a tool of exploitation, such as in relation to sexual abuse and exploitation. It is a technology of alienation used for bullying, hate speech, discrimination and violence. It lends itself to information distortion and manipulation, such as hallucinations, fakes and scams, misinformation and disinformation, propaganda and surveillance. It is an instrument of stress, replete with addiction and superficial self-validation. It is emerging as an instrument of human subjugation and dejection, especially when and where it controls human lives perhaps absolutely.

How then is the world community to handle that ambivalence? The international guiding framework is the Convention on the Rights of the Child

and its General Comment No.25 on children's rights in the digital environment, highlighting child protection.

In reality, implementation is open to a variety of orientations, bearing in mind that both AI and related responses are in a state of flux.

On one front, there is the two-track situation whereby a general approach is contrasted with a more specific approach in handling the relationship between AI and children. The former is exemplified by various laws and guidelines of a general nature, such as to protect children's privacy and safety and to highlight AI transparency, especially to help explain the pros and cons of AI to children.

The more specific approach is to target various sectors for action. Twenty five years ago, the Online Privacy Child Protection Act of the US offered a preview. It imposed a condition related to minimum age; children under 13 years old cannot consent to have their data revealed. In 2025, California opted for this additional, specific intervention. Its recent Patients Communications' law stipulates that healthcare facilities using AI must adopt clear disclaimers when there is AI-generated content. There is a kind of "watermarking" or labeling of AI generated content. The possibility of contacting human health care providers must also be available.

On another front, there is the contrasting vision between ethical guidelines of a persuasive nature concerning AI utilization and the prescriptive approach of binding regulations with consequential accountability in the case of violations. The ethical approach has emerged from some international agencies and it highlights basic principles, such as "Do No Harm", safety and security, privacy

and data protection, responsibility and accountability, transparency and explainability of AI's functions.

The prime example of the prescriptive approach is the European Union (EU)'s AI Act, in force in 2025. There is a list of prohibited practices. Social profiling, where data might be used to discriminate against people, is forbidden. Subliminal targeting of children's emotions as a kind of manipulation is proscribed. The collection of real-time biometric data for surveillance purposes is not allowed, although there might be some leeway in regard to national security. With lesser risks, the business sector is called upon to have Codes of Conduct as a kind of self-regulation for policing itself, subject to linking up with the EU supervisory system as a whole. Violations can lead to massive fines.

Globally, certain realities are inevitable. Where there is illegal content, such as the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, for instance child pornography, national laws already prohibit such practices and they automatically apply to AI related actions. However, there might be differences in regard to whether children appearing in AI generated content are real children or merely digitally generated. The issue is not settled internationally, although child protection groups prefer to prohibit all images of children in such situations, without having to prove whether real children are involved.

From another dimension, there is the issue of how to deal with harmful content which is not illegal. For example, the mere fact that X hates Y is not necessarily illegal in international law or national law. Other actions may thus be required. At present, the digital industry, especially its developers



and deployers, have already adopted some tools through self-regulation to moderate content and take down harmful content, at times with and through filtering. For instance, many platforms have Codes against homophobic messages and they delete them, even if the national law nearby does not prohibit such content. This might also cover various forms of bullying and grooming of children which might otherwise lead to discrimination or violence.

The key lies with digital and AI literacy so that the public, especially children, parents and teachers, are able to enjoy the benefits of technology safely, securely, "smartly" and sustainably. This can be helped by the AI industry where it ensures that its members are AI literate from the angle of assessing the risks as part of due diligence and mitigating them, with guardrails balancing between freedom of expression and child rights' protection. In essence, there can be no

substitute for an educated and literate public with a discerning and critically analytical mind, as well as to have cognitive and affective means to protect itself from transgressions.

Urgently, families need to have options for "digital detox". This would enable parents to work with children to safeguard some spaces at home to be free from technology. There need to be periods of human interaction without technology, together with leisure time together as humans. Humane activities such as pro bono help for disadvantaged groups need to be nurtured, to generate the warmth of empathy which no technology can replace.

Hence, the community needs "Top-Tips for Digital Detox" or "TT-4-DD" now!

(The writer is Professor Emeritus at Chulalongkorn University, a former UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children and is a member of the Advisory Group of UNICEF, Thailand.)
Special to ANN.

India's universities: Liberal in label, authoritarian at heart

JOHN J KENNEDY

Recent student protests at a prominent private university near Delhi—sparked by the installation of scanners and metal detectors deemed intrusive—have reignited a crucial debate on the state of liberal education in India. While university administrations often justify such measures as necessary for safety and discipline, they risk fostering mistrust and undermining the intellectual freedom central to liberal education. This incident raises broader questions about the authenticity of universities branding themselves as “liberal” and their alignment with the true essence of liberal education—a philosophy that remains widely misunderstood in India, often reduced to a buzzword rather than embraced as a transformative ideal.

The word “university,” derived from the Latin *universitas*, signifies a “whole”—a community dedicated to cultivating diverse knowledge through collaboration between teachers and learners. Historically, universities have been envisioned as

spaces for enlightenment and intellectual liberation. They were not merely training grounds for careers but sanctuaries for self-discovery, debate, and the fearless pursuit of truth. Thinkers like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, India's former president and a renowned philosopher, echoed this vision, describing universities as “nurseries of youthful courage and excitement.” Yet, the reality of Indian universities today often diverges sharply from this ideal. Bureaucratic stagnation, rote learning, and a culture that discourages dissent have stifled intellectual curiosity and critical thought, leaving little room for the spirit of liberal education to thrive.

The emergence of universities in India claiming to offer liberal education initially seemed promising. However, many of these institutions have fallen short, revealing deep contradictions. One significant issue is the conflation of “liberal arts” and “liberal education.” While liberal arts focuses on the study of disciplines like literature, philosophy, and history, liberal education transcends disciplinary boundaries. It is not just about what is studied

but how knowledge is engaged with. Liberal arts education is very different from merely offering liberal arts programmes. At its core, liberal education fosters critical thinking, open inquiry, and the courage to challenge assumptions. Unfortunately, many Indian universities branding themselves as “liberal” undermine these principles through surveillance, rigid norms, and the suppression of dissent. Such measures erode the trust and openness essential to a genuinely liberal environment. Moreover, the assumption that hiring faculty educated at liberal universities abroad will inherently help nurture a liberal university environment on Indian campuses is misguided.

For many higher educational institutions, the term “liberal” serves more as a marketing tool than a commitment to intellectual freedom. In a competitive education market, adopting the label “liberal” may attract students and parents seeking a modern, progressive education. However, without meaningful cultural shifts, these institutions remain bound by traditional hierarchies, standardised assessments,

and a results-oriented mindset that prioritises reputation over student growth. A truly liberal university would stress curiosity, encourage intellectual risk-taking, and nurture an environment where students feel free to challenge norms and engage in meaningful dialogue. Yet, many so-called liberal institutions fail to move beyond superficial branding.

This challenge is not unique to India. Even globally renowned institutions like Harvard have faced criticism for compromising their liberal ideals under external pressures. A recent viral video of a Harvard graduate criticising the university for failing to uphold its principles highlights the universal tension between lofty ideals and practical constraints. However, throughout history, great educators and philosophers have articulated the essence of liberal education. Socrates urged us to “question everything,” Confucius emphasised moral growth and societal harmony, and Rabindranath Tagore championed creative freedom and interconnectedness. These thinkers remind us that liberal education is not defined by curricula or marketing rhetoric but by a culture that

values curiosity, independence, and the courage to question authority.

Against this backdrop, the University Grants Commission's (UGC) proposal to appoint non-academicians as vice chancellors adds another layer of complexity. While strategic planning and corporate practices can bring value, prioritising efficiency over intellectual exploration risks turning universities into corporate entities. Regardless of background, university leadership must uphold academic freedom and critical inquiry. Universities are not merely institutions but spaces for dialogue, dissent, and intellectual growth. For Indian universities to truly embody liberal education, they must move beyond superficial branding and embrace meaningful reform. Data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21 reveals that only 1.5% of Indian universities even offer interdisciplinary liberal arts programmes, highlighting the limited scope and reach of a possibility toward liberal education. Naturally, therefore, a 2022 study by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) found

that 68% of students feel discouraged from expressing dissenting opinions, citing fear of administrative backlash.

The path forward requires reimagining universities as spaces for intellectual liberation. This includes decentralising administrative control, encouraging student-led initiatives, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration. Universities must not be viewed as factories producing graduates but as incubators of thoughtful, engaged global citizens. This vision, championed by scholars and thinkers of the East and the West, remains within reach if universities are willing to rise to the challenge. By embracing the true spirit of liberal education—rooted in curiosity, critical inquiry, and intellectual freedom—Indian universities can reclaim their role as nurseries of youthful courage and excitement. They can prepare students not just for careers but for lives of purpose and meaning, ensuring that the ideals of liberal education are not just a slogan but a lived reality.

(The writer is a professor and dean at Christ Deemed to be University, Bengaluru)

24/2/25

Higher education: A crisis unfolding

India's low spending on the sector casts doubts on its commitment to a knowledge-based economy

**DAYAKAR PEDDI AND
ANUSHI TIWARY**

In the grand tapestry of human development, education remains a way of empowerment and progress. It is not merely a means to economic growth but a fundamental pillar of social justice, individual freedom and collective well-being. Yet, in India — a nation teeming with youthful energy and aspirations — the state of higher education presents a paradox. While the country has made strides in expanding access to primary education, its investment in higher education, particularly in research, remains woefully inadequate, especially in comparison to nations with similar socio-economic profiles.

To understand India's position, it is instructive to examine countries with comparable socio-economic indicators, such as Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Mexico, Thailand, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia and the Philippines. Like India, these nations are classified as middle-income economies with significant youth populations and aspirations for rapid development. Yet, their investment in higher education tells a story of stronger commitment. According to Unesco's Institute for Statistics (UIS), these countries spend, on average, between 0.8% and 1.5% of their GDP on higher education.

In stark contrast, India spends a mere 0.6% of its GDP on higher education. This disparity is not just a matter of numbers but a reflection of deeper systemic issues. It raises questions about India's commitment to fostering a knowledge-based economy and its ability to utilise the potential of its demographic dividend. It tells a story of stagnation, erratic funding and missed opportunities. While there has been a nominal increase in absolute terms, spending as a percentage of GDP has remained gravely deficient at around 0.6%, far below the global average of 1%.

Higher education is not merely a line item in a national budget; it reflects a society's commitment to its future. However, it has historically been a low priority. While sectors like defence, infrastructure and subsidies receive significant allocations, education — particularly higher education — is often sidelined. Perhaps it reflects a lack of political will to invest in long-term human capital development. On top of that, fiscal constraints, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and competing priorities such as healthcare, social welfare and economic stimulus packages, have diverted resources away.

According to the NSSO 75th Social Consumption-Education Round (2017-18), the increased reliance on private funding has resulted in significant out-of-pocket expenditure by households, with the average share of higher education expenses accounting for 15.3% of total household expenditure in rural areas and 18.4% in urban areas among households participating in higher education.

Education, being on the concurrent list of the Indian Constitution, bears the brunt of a lack of coordination and inadequate central funding, forcing states to shoulder a disproportionate burden, often at the expense of other critical sectors. While initiatives like the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) and the National Education Policy (NEP) have focused on expanding access to higher education, there has been insufficient investment in improving quality. Stagnant spending has led to overcrowded classrooms, outdated curricula and inadequate infrastructure.

State universities, which cater to the majority of students, have been chronically underfunded. Meanwhile, the rise of elite institutions like the IITs and IIMs has deepened regional disparities, creating a two-tiered system that entrenches social and economic inequalities. According to a World Bank report (2021), only a small fraction of Indian universities meet global standards for quality and research output. India's total research and development (R&D) spending is a mere 0.7% of GDP, far below the global average of 1.8%. This has limited the country's ability to innovate and compete in the global knowledge economy.

The current scenario places India far from achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. The neglect is symptomatic of a deeper malaise: the prioritisation of short-term economic gains over long-term human development. Yet, there is hope. Higher education is not a luxury but a critical driver of innovation, critical thinking and social mobility. The solution lies in reimagining it as a public good and a collective responsibility, and by reorienting priorities to ensure it serves as a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion. It demands a commitment to expanding access, improving quality and fostering an environment where intellectual curiosity and critical inquiry can thrive. Only then can India hope to bridge the gap between its aspirations and realities and move closer to achieving the promise of SDG.

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DN/16/6

The Indian university and the search for a V-C

There have been reservations expressed from various quarters on the Draft University Grants Commission (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, that have been published for discussion.

The main reservations pertain to the regulations that indicate the method of appointment of Vice-Chancellors and the broadening of experience prescribed. Both need to be distinguished from the point of view of dynamic elements in a fast-changing federal polity as well as the legal precedents that arise from a catena of decisions by the Supreme Court of India. This article examines both issues in context.

A lesser role for the State executive

First, it must be noted that the Court has considerably reduced the role of the State executive in the selection of Vice-Chancellors (V-C) of State-funded universities. Many States continue to have their nominees in the search-cum-selection committees under such provisions in the State statutes. The Court has consistently and categorically ruled that the State executive should have no role either with the process or the recommendation leading to the appointment to be made by the Chancellor. This has been necessitated by the co-validity of the UGC's 2018 regulations (which mandated only its representative in the selection committee) leading to interpretations by States that the rest of the composition could continue as per the State legislations.

In *Gambhirdan K. Gadhi vs The State Of Gujarat* (2019), *Sonali Chakravarti Banerjee* (2022), *Professor (Dr.) Sreejith P.S vs Dr. Rajasree M.S.* (2022) and *Dr. Premachandran Keezhoth and Anr. vs The Chancellor Kannur University and Ors.* (2023), the Court has enunciated that members of the State executive shall not be members of the search-cum-selection committee and evidence of such influence would invalidate the process, ab initio void, irrespective of whether the appointee was qualified or not. The resultant draft regulations of 2025 limit the search-cum-selection committee to highly qualified persons who have held the office of V-C or equivalent, to be nominated by the Chancellor of the university, the executive body of the university and the UGC. The Statutes of the Central Universities also reveal a similar pattern – where the nominees of the Visitor of the University and the UGC, and not the officers or representatives of the central



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The UGC's draft regulations reflect the view that there needs to be a reinvention of university governance – an idea that the larger university community must support

executive, conduct the selection. Nevertheless, the State executives have a point that State universities are largely a product of statute of the State Legislatures and that a majority of their funds and efforts have been provided by the State executive. Their mandate also involves regional development and provincial priorities in research and advancement. They have to necessarily feed the State innovation ecosystem and work in tandem with the government scientific and development establishment. The central universities enrol far too low to meet requirements while private universities could be priced out of the reach of many.

Options to consider

In this context, there are two ways to look at the difficulties stated.

Alternatively, the representative of the university executive can be a consensus candidate who is informally approved by the State executive which is amply represented in the university executive. From the present judicial precedent, it cannot be a government officer or a person who enjoys the direct patronage of the government. A suitably independent and former eminent academic who is also acceptable to the government could well be nominated by the University executive.

However, it is clear that in the light of the Kannur University case and the Sreejith case of APJ Abdul Kalam Technological University that the powers to consider the short-listing and recommendation of a name or a re-appointment will have to remain away from the State or central executive which is important in preserving the requisite neutrality and impartiality required of the high office of the V-C.

A second option could be – should the UGC consider it to be appropriate – to allow the State executive to nominate one member to the search-cum-selection committee in addition to the member representing the University executive. In the process of making the search/selection, political personalities tend to have the view that the nominees would echo their master's voice.

In the experience of this writer, this is not the case and the august members tend to air sufficiently independent and reasoned views. They do not parrot extraneous views that are unsupported by the record. Here again, the nominee could be stipulated to be a former V-C or equivalent and not enjoying a position of patronage as required of advisers serving the Union Public Service Commission. Either way, it should not be too difficult to factor in the concerns of the State executives and make the

process wholesome and well-participated from the State's perspective. It is best to avoid a collision course.

The second question which involves the indication to broaden the field of experience of prospective V-Cs to academically eminent persons who are experienced with public policy, government, the public sector and private sector industry, need not raise eyebrows. It was a norm followed in the past which took second place between 2010 and 2018 when there was a 'scriptural reading' of the 2010 UGC regulations. Many courts, most notably the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, took restrictive views of the prescribed qualification, limiting it to 10 years of professorship or even teaching experience.

The outlook must change

Post-tertiary education, highly cited and indexed publications, a notable articulation of visionary insights, high communication skills, an ability to network and team work, presentability, dynamism and proof of diverse intellectual achievements, and even sporting traits, are well-established international norms that are looked into in the search for V-Cs. Various men and women of eminence have graced the high academic office, reflecting their wealth of experience gained in parliaments, from public diplomacy, industry, international organisations, public service, non-university institutional research, work in the voluntary sector, from creative writing, the performing arts, music and even sport in India and abroad.

Excellence and eminence are not restricted to academic departments and colleges any more. Restricting the field of choosing a V-C to the teaching or research professions alone would not be appropriate in a context of rapid change and the dire need to reinvent the Indian university. Pulling down stereotyped shibboleths and rebuilding with considerable re-imagination call for original thinking, critical analysis, advocacy, networking and team-working skills. As researcher Amanda Goodall (author of *Socrates in the Boardroom*) argued, it is not enough that a V-C is modelled after Socrates, mostly absorbed in deep thought. The days of narcissistic, isolated glory of the university enterprise is long over. The winning university of tomorrow needs to be innovative and business-like as well as deeply philosophical. This calls for considerably liberal gateways for leadership positions. The UGC has rightly attempted it, true to purpose, and the same needs the support of the university community now.

UGC's new teacher appraisal system is a lot more holistic

The criticism of the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s recent reforms based on the National Education Policy 2020 in these columns (UGC's *flawed proposals for teacher hiring, promotions*, Sukhadeo Thorat, February 18) fails to recognise higher education governance's dynamic and evolving nature. The argument that online consultations on regulatory matters compromise thorough reflection is based on an outdated understanding of discourse and participation. Digital platforms are vital to democratising engagement with stakeholders, making the process more inclusive, not less rigorous.

Has the academic performance indicator (API) been removed from the 2025 draft 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 Institutions) Regulations without extensively studying its limitations? This assumes that the deficiencies of API were unknown or insignificant. The assumption that removing the API system constitutes moving away from objectivity to subjectivity disregards the inherent limitations of a mechanistic evaluation framework. While the API was conceived with good intentions, it had evolved into a rigid, number-driven mechanism that often incentivised quantity over quality in academic contributions.

Faculty members were forced to comply with API rather than focus on genuine intellectual growth. In the best institutions globally, it is recognised that academic excellence is multidimensional and can't be represented by rigid scorecards. The notion that faculty recruitment and promotion are objective solely when numerical indicators are used to assess performance is a narrow interpretation of fairness. While numerical scores may provide a semblance of fairness, they are ill-equipped to capture the full spectrum of faculty members' intellectual and pedagogical contributions.

The draft regulations emphasise qualitative judgment and peer evaluation for assessing a scholar's contributions. This accommodates intellectual diversity without reducing it to mere numbers and aligns with the evolving nature of academic inquiry. Such an approach is a move toward a more reflective, context-sensitive, and inclusive evaluation system.

NEP 2020's vision of multidisciplinary learning, research excellence, and institutional autonomy necessitates moving away from archaic evaluation frameworks. In embracing these changes, UGC is enhancing transparency by ensuring that academic contributions are

assessed to reflect their impact.

The contention that the selection committee's discretionary powers would lead to favouritism is based on an oversimplified dichotomy between numerical objectivity and human judgment. An effective selection process incorporates multidimensional assessments that balance qualitative and quantitative measures. Exclusive reliance on rigid numerical thresholds does not necessarily ensure high academic standards; instead, the subject experts in selection committees must focus on an appraisal of teaching effectiveness, research impact, and innovative contributions that may not always fit within a predefined formula. The assertion that if subject experts in a selection committee evaluate research publications and academic contributions inherently leads to bias disregards the importance of peer review and institutional oversight. The presumption that the selection committee wields unchecked authority and operates without accountability overlooks academic governance and professional assessment principles. It is not uncommon for reputable educational institutions worldwide to function on the principles of rigorous peer evaluation, ensuring that quality and scholarly integrity are upheld.

Furthermore, introducing an assessment parameter called "significant contributions" in the 2025 UGC draft regulations should not be hastily dismissed as an arbitrary shift in policy. Digital content creation, establishment of start-ups, student mentorship, research in Indian knowledge systems and promotion of Indian languages in higher education reflect an attempt to align faculty evaluation with contemporary academic and societal needs. Any claim that such contributions lack clear definitions overlooks the possibility that they are intended to encourage a broader and more holistic understanding of an educator's role. The criticism that the emphasis on Indian knowledge systems perpetuates exclusivity ignores the inclusive intent behind the policy. The regulation does not privilege one philosophical tradition over others but encourages comprehensive engagement with India's diverse intellectual heritage.

The recalibration of faculty assessment and selection mechanisms are an alignment with the evolving ethos of higher education, where quality is measured in quantifiable increments in an ecosystem that values integrity, diversity, and academic excellence.



M Jagadesh Kumar

M Jagadesh Kumar, chairman, UGC and former vice-chancellor, JNU
The views expressed are personal

Drowned out in the NEP debate

The education sector in India needs both the Centre and states to work together. Neither should insist on an upper hand

The stand-off between the Union ministry of education and the Tamil Nadu government has reached Parliament. It started following the Centre's decision to hold back funding under the Samagra Shiksha scheme, citing the state's refusal to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Tamil Nadu has alleged that the three-language formula proposed in the NEP is a ploy to impose Hindi.

However, the controversy, which threatens to engulf all states ruled by parties other than the BJP or its allies, has ceased to be just about the NEP. Questions about federalism, language policy and central allocation of funds have been flagged in this debate which is also happening under the overhand of the delimitation issue. Education is on the concurrent list in the Constitution, which means both the Centre and the states are allowed some say in the sector. The Centre draws up national policies and provides some funding, but the states alone have the agency to produce the results. This arrangement is inescapable considering India's size and diversity. However, the Centre wants states to adopt its policies in full to receive funds. Such intransigence can upset the delicate federal balance. The Centre ought to view the NEP as a broad guideline and let the states tweak it as per local considerations. Surely, it must try to convince dissenters to come on board, but the negotiation should not foreclose the option of holding an open-ended conversation. Similarly, while Tamil Nadu's concern about federalism is understandable, its stance on the language formula is flawed: NEP does not insist on compulsory learning of Hindi. And the state's insistence that children should be taught only two languages is flawed. Tamil Nadu can offer a southern language as the third language instead of Hindi (or simply choose to let demand drive the policy; if enough students want to learn Hindi, it should be offered).

Meanwhile, the Centre must ask itself if so much energy should be lavished on school education in Tamil Nadu, instead of say, Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. The Gross Enrolment Ratio at the secondary level (classes nine to twelve) figures are instructive: Enrolment was 89.5 in Tamil Nadu in 2023-24, compared to 58.5 in Uttar Pradesh and 37.8 in Bihar (UDISE report published by the ministry of education). The Centre should not micromanage public education in Tamil Nadu — or any other state — or present the NEP as an iron-clad policy. However, it may study the Tamil Nadu and Kerala models in public education and see if they have lessons for educationally backward regions.

Americans are losing faith in higher education

Elite networks

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

The 21st-century populist Right has turned out shinningly savvy at deploying Leftist critiques to its own goals. The philosopher, Bruno Latour, pointed to this clever sleight-of-hand two decades ago by describing the argument of certain Republicans in the United States of America that global warming is just a social construct. Postmodernist scepticism of objective reality, traditionally adapted by the Left for the dismantling of ideologies behind race and gender, became an unlikely rhetorical tool used to discredit scientific arguments about the reality of environmental degradation. Last week, the irony came full circle as the Donald Trump administration cancelled the National Institute of Health's grants on research on trans-identity on the grounds of such research being "unscientific", fuelled by "gender ideology extremism". These days, whether something is science or ideology depends on who's in power.

Going by the position of the US president, Donald Trump, on environment and sustainability, the degrading state of the planet might as well be a Left-liberal fiction. But his administration's larger attack on higher education is not a mere use of Leftist methodology. It weaponises a larger American lack of faith in college, particularly its power to shape social mobility, that is widespread across the political spectrum for a range of conflicting reasons. And in its decision to tax the endowments of wealthy private universities, this administration has done something with which the Left will have real trouble disagreeing.

No observer of higher education in the US can deny that upward social mobility — that great American dream — has been poorly served by the established network of wealthy private universities. Elite private universities have always prided themselves on being exclusive rather than inclusive, with their goal of combining social exclusivity with intellectual exclusivity historically muddled. It is well-known that the great burden of upward social mobility, the fulfilment of working class, minoritised, and immigrant dreams are carried out on a real scale by the vast network of community colleges and second and third tier State universities across the US.

While State-supported education has increasingly withered under Republican assaults, Trump's call to tax wealthy private universities that have enjoyed non-profit status has brought the wheel full circle. We now have the complete mirror to the pervasive phenomenon of popular decline in faith in higher education to secure social mobility or even to get a job. The forces behind this erosion of faith range far and wide, from practical ones like astronomical tuition to ideological ones such as the perceived 'wokeness' of universities — forces from



the entire range of the political spectrum. But anyone who is familiar with the way the leading Ivy League colleges have multiplied their endowments in the last few decades through the sophisticated nexus among their alumni network, boards of trustees, and Wall Street (most famously illustrated by the wealth-management of Yale's legendary endowment manager, David Swensen), may have trouble negotiating it with the non-profit status of these endowments.

This is an open-ended ethical debate. The Ivy League principle of devoting colossal resources to a tiny group of people is the academic embodiment of capitalism. But this academic realisation of high capitalism also created, in the 20th century, what is possibly history's most magnificent university system, with research that reshaped life and thought and moulded equally impressive student trajectories, albeit carved with inherited privilege. The American private university system has exactly the same merits and flaws that inhere in capitalism at large.

Whatever the consortium of causes — whatever unlikely coalition of Left and Right peevish — the bad news is that a large segment of American people have now lost their faith in the power of higher education, and certainly their willingness to pay a hefty price for it. For State schools, the tags grow heavier with eroding support from federal and state governments — something that is certain to accelerate if the federal government ends up dismantling the Department of Education. This deepens a vicious cycle where low government support and high tuition increasingly catalyse each other. The net result is that the faith in an overpriced college education continues to drop, and this is where the populist Right embodied by Trump finds favourable political weather for its own dismissal of the needs of higher education, particularly of its inclusive versions.

If Trump's decision to tax large en-

dowments of increasingly corporatised private universities comes across as aligned with Left critiques of elite higher-ed, the Republican withdrawal of tax dollars from public universities remains an aggressive right-wing measure. It so happens that the latter has also been the Right's major method of erosion of the efficacy and credibility of higher education in the predominantly socialist landscape of India — not just through attrition of funds but by incessant political interference and with convenient finger-pointing at student activism that has repeatedly accentuated the "anti-national" tag.

The most terrifying fact is that this is probably the worst time in history to lose faith in higher education. Not that there was ever a good time for this loss. But as a wide variety of jobs and skills become irrelevant with the invasion of machine intelligence in the coming years, a sizeable section of the workforce will need ways to retrain and re-educate themselves. AI will do a lot of things for us, and massive wealth will be produced for a tiny number of oligarchs whom experts have started calling the techno-feudalists. But just the way digital culture and social media created a false sense of mass empowerment while turning the masses into unsuspecting markets for the techno-feudalists, we now know that AI will eventually perfect this exploitation where the immense economic benefits of machine intelligence will be sucked up by a tiny minority of cloud capitalists. For the vast majority, urgent questions about life, skills, and employability will depend on constant and innovative re-education. But the clever stimulation of mass anger against the perceived elitism of higher education only leaves the masses at the mercy of oligarchs who have aced the populism game. In the inhuman world of patterns and algorithms trained only to maximise profits for the techno-feudalists, there is no mercy for humanity. *SA/12/10*

Saikat Majumdar's most recent book is *The Amateur: Self-Making and the Humanities in the Postcolony*

Is learning Hindi as a third language necessary?

PARLEY



Yogendra Yadav

Psephologist and founding national president of Swaraj India



T.M. Krishna

Carnatic musician and author

The National Education Policy, 2020, encourages students up to at least Class 5 to learn a regional language in addition to the local language or mother tongue and English. While the Central government asserts that the choice of the additional regional language is left to the States, the NEP's strong pitch for the three-language formula has led to fear, especially in Tamil Nadu, that there is an attempt being made to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking States. This week, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin dubbed the NEP a "Hindutva policy" aimed at promoting Hindi, rather than focusing on India's overall development. Is learning Hindi as a third language necessary? Yogendra Yadav and T.M. Krishna discuss the question in a conversation moderated by K.V. Prasad. Edited excerpts:

Should learning a third language be made compulsory?

Yogendra Yadav: Absolutely not. First, because the spirit of federalism and respect for diversity is foundational to the Union of India. So, nothing can be imposed on any State, least of all a language policy. If we have different views on language, they are resolved through consensus, not through imposition. I'm entirely with the DMK and the people of Tamil Nadu on the imposition issue.

T.M. Krishna: If I may ask, why learn three languages? To be clear, we are not talking about students learning other languages of their own accord, which is anyway happening. A government that selectively deletes chapters from history textbooks, stating that there is too much of an education burden on students, is not even willing to look at the fact that learning another language is definitely a burden on them. Also, children in primary and middle school don't have an imagination of time or the distant future. So asking them to learn a third language, in the name of future benefit, is basically an imposition. There is also the argument being made that learning more languages creates unity. This is a smokescreen. Forcing a language on someone is not unity.

YY: Once we disentangle the idea of teaching three languages from Central imposition and the compulsion of Hindi, we can discuss the issue dispassionately. The point about the burden of education is something that experts have handled. They have come to the conclusion that if you teach a third language, it only helps your primary and secondary language, so I believe that the three-language formula merits serious



A student at a government school in Tamil Nadu. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

consideration on grounds of pedagogy and national unity. As for practicality, I know of schools which do follow this formula. They do not give you the option of all the 22 languages (recognised in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution), but they give you three or four options to choose from. These things can be worked out provided there is a political will and a capacity to teach anything at all.

If compulsory learning of an additional language will be a burden on students, will it not be equally burdensome on schools, since they will need qualified teachers and funds for this purpose?

TMK: More than 5,000 schools in Uttar Pradesh are managed by a single teacher. Bihar has a massive teacher shortage. So, even in terms of resources, this formula does not make sense. When resources are few, it makes more sense to look at the ways in which we can teach primary subjects better. And when the mother tongue is the mode of learning and communication in class, and there is English as well, I don't believe that adding another language is necessary.

Is it fair to make adoption of the three-language formula a pre-condition for the release of Central funds for schemes?

YY: Holding back grants is unconstitutional. This is part of a political assault on the autonomy of the Tamil Nadu government, led by the Governor himself. I understand why not just the DMK, but all parties and the people of Tamil Nadu feel slighted.

TMK: It is unconstitutional, unethical, and devoid of any basis. Some people say, let the people decide whether they want three languages or two. But people did not decide



Learning three languages, which are distinct from each other, is a good idea to nurture multilingualism that is inherent in our cultures. But this cannot be imposed on anyone. Students should learn a modern Indian language that is distinct from their mother tongue.

YOGENDRA YADAV

about the three-language policy; individuals in the Union government made this decision.

Why is there so much resistance to an educational policy that stresses on the need to learn an additional language?

YY: My suspicion is that the resistance does not come from pedagogical concerns. It emanates from disquiet with double standards. Frankly, the formula was sabotaged by north India. The expectation was that all the southern and eastern States would learn Hindi, while the Hindi speakers found a shortcut for themselves – they used Sanskrit as a shield so that they would not have to learn a new language. So, in effect, the policy meant that everyone would be forced to learn the mother tongue of Hindi speakers, but they would not have to learn anyone else's mother tongue. That legitimate unease has clouded the debate on multilingualism in our country.

TMK: Multilingualism is not just a political problem; it's pedagogic too. The pedagogical methods have changed. At the primary and middle-school level, activity-based learning and experiential learning should be the focus. There are already two languages at play; that itself is multilingualism. I do not view multilingualism in terms of language alone; it is a way of making people be diverse in feeling and in being. People learn languages when they forge relationships, for instance. We can't forget that cultural character and emotional connections make people learn a language.

Monolingualism is predominant in many Hindi-speaking States, irrespective of the three-language formula.

YY: The problem is the false sense of pride that many people in north India have developed, especially in Hindi-speaking areas, that somehow Hindi is a more privileged language than any other language. Many people in the north use the term 'national language', which is nowhere mentioned in the Constitution. This is

what irks the non-Hindi speaker. The Hindi that we know today is a recent and young language, unlike Tamil or Kannada, which are some of the oldest and richest languages in the world.

TMK: It is difficult to get data on this, but I would like to know how many schools in north India that profess to teach three languages really do that. Is the policy actually being followed?

YY: As I said, in most north Indian States, Hindi is taught along with English and Sanskrit. Sanskrit has become a way to bypass the requirement of the third language. So, technically, yes, it is followed.

TMK: Exactly my point. There is an important cultural point that needs to be understood about the Tamil people and the Tamil language. Tamil as a language is very distinct from every other Sanskrit-based or Sanskrit-derived language. Fundamentally, it is a very difficult task for a Tamil speaker to even learn Hindi or its cousin languages. In Tamil Nadu, people have learned other languages on their own. The dominant positioning of Sanskrit in the NEP, especially for a Tamil speaker, is intimidating especially when the language is so distinct and different grammatically and structurally.

YY: To position Sanskrit as the sole carrier of our cultural heritage is a serious mistake. Besides, Sanskrit is not being taught to inculcate classical learning, but mainly to sabotage the three-language formula. In effect, Hindi speakers are not learning a new language or script.

What do you propose is the way forward to end the current stand-off?

YY: Learning three languages, which are distinct from each other, is a good idea to nurture multilingualism that is inherent in our cultures. But this cannot be imposed on anyone. Students should learn a modern Indian language that is distinct from their mother tongue. In the north, it would be "preferably a south Indian language" – exactly what the original formula had mandated and was never implemented.

TMK: The distinctness is exactly why I feel there should be only two languages. English is already so distinct from whatever language you speak, be it Hindi or Tamil. Therefore, adding another language is not going to help.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

Why MBAs are just a waste of time, money

The biggest success stories today are being written by engineers, product designers, and domain experts. So, learn real skills, join a startup, and build something that matters

Last year, my company Vionix Biosciences hired a bright intern from a college in Delhi. For her, this was a rare opportunity — she was learning advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) research and applying cutting-edge technologies in ways that could have had a profound impact on the world. She would have worked with some of the top tech leaders in the United States (US) and engineers at Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, contributing to groundbreaking innovations. Her future was bright. She was on track to become a hotshot developer, earning far more than any MBA graduate — both in salary and stock options. More importantly, she had the potential to do real, meaningful work.

Yet, at the end of her internship, she turned down a full-time job offer. She wanted to study management. She needed months to prepare for entrance exams. We wished her well. But she didn't get into the business

school of her choice. Now, she will waste two years of her life and her family's savings, only to earn less than the starting salary we had offered her.

This is the tragedy of the MBA dream. Students believe that an expensive degree will catapult them into corporate success. But in today's world of accelerating technological change, an MBA is little more than an overpriced badge that adds little real value. The tens of lakhs of rupees students pour into tuition, living expenses, and lost income will never be recovered. And even those who manage to secure coveted spots at the prestigious Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) are struggling to justify their investment.

There was a time when MBAs mattered. My own MBA from New York University's Stern School of Business was one of the best investments I ever made. It helped me transition from being a programmer to a project leader and then to a vice-president at Credit Suisse First Boston. I learned essential skills — management, marketing, law, accounting — that helped me climb the corporate ladder and eventually, become an entrepreneur.

But times have changed. The corporate world that once relied on MBA graduates to fill its ranks is being reshaped by technology. The era of slow, predictable career progression is over. Today, breakthroughs happen at lightning speed, and companies are

built overnight. Companies don't need managers trained in outdated case studies; they need builders, technologists, and problem solvers. The rigid frameworks and financial modeling drilled into MBA students are useless in a world where business models change faster than university syllabuses can keep up.

And let's talk about cost. An MBA from a top-tier Indian business school costs anywhere between ₹20 lakh and ₹40 lakh. Add to that the cost of living, the interest on loans, and — most importantly — the opportunity cost of two years lost. If these students had instead joined a startup or built their own ventures, they could have earned, learned, and built something valuable. But instead, they spend years studying PowerPoint presentations, only to re-enter the workforce at salaries that rarely justify the investment.

Even the IIM graduates, the supposed cream of the crop, are finding it harder to land high-paying jobs. Placement reports tell only half the story. What they don't reveal is that many students are placed in roles that don't require an MBA at all. They could have got the same jobs without spending a fortune on a degree. And for those who do land well-paying roles, many quickly find themselves stuck in bureaucratic, uninspiring jobs, far removed from the excitement and impact they once aspired to have.



Vivek Wadhwa



In today's world of accelerating technological change, an MBA is little more than an overpriced badge that adds little real value.

HT PHOTO

Meanwhile, startups and tech companies are creating new wealth and changing the world. The biggest success stories today are being written by engineers, product designers, and domain experts — not by MBAs. The skills that matter in today's world — AI, software development, biotech, data science — are not taught in business schools. Those who master these fields are the ones shaping the future. And they are the ones who will be in highest demand, earning far beyond what any MBA graduate can hope for.

And what exactly are business schools churning out these days? Investment bankers and management consultants — an elite club of spreadsheet warriors who make fortunes moving numbers around and telling actual builders how to run their companies. They create complex financial models that rarely reflect reality and write PowerPoint decks that could put an insomniac to sleep. Meanwhile, the real innovation is happening elsewhere, where people are actually making things.

The world is shifting from degree-based credentials to skill-based hiring. Companies are no longer interested in whether you have an MBA; they want to know what you can do. The best way to learn is by doing. Working at a startup, launching a project, solving real-world problems — these experiences teach more than any business school ever can.

If you are considering an MBA, ask yourself: What do you really hope to gain? If it's prestige, understand that prestige does not pay the bills. If it's knowledge, recognise that everything an MBA teaches is available online for free. If it's a network, consider that the best networks today are built by working on ambitious projects with brilliant people, not by sitting in a classroom.

So, here's my advice — skip the MBA. Learn real skills. Join a startup. Build something that matters. The world is changing, and the MBAs are being left behind.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix Biosciences. The views expressed are personal

5/14/25

पूरे देश में सबको हिंदी ही बोलनी चाहिए, यह कोई अच्छी बात नहीं

राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति (NEP) को लेकर केंद्र सरकार और तमिलनाडु की DMK सरकार में ठनी हुई है। इस हफ्ते संसद में भी इस मुद्दे पर काफी बहस और तकरार दिखी। DMK क्यों NEP और हिंदी का इतना विरोध कर रही है, इस मुद्दे पर NBT की पूनम पाण्डे ने बात की DMK नेता और सांसद कनिमोरी करुणानिधि से। पेश है बातचीत के प्रमुख अंश :

■ केंद्र सरकार और BJP का कहना है कि तमिलनाडु सरकार और DMK NEP का विरोध सिर्फ राजनीति के लिए कर रही है। आप इस पर क्या कहेंगे?

केंद्र सरकार को समझना होगा कि यह संघर्ष आज से शुरू नहीं हुआ है। यह 1930 के दशक में हिंदी थोपने के खिलाफ शुरू हुआ था। यह आंदोलन विभिन्न क्षेत्रों, विचारधाराओं और राजनीतिक पृष्ठभूमि के नेताओं ने शुरू किया जो बाद में जन आंदोलन बन गया। तमिलनाडु ने इस संघर्ष में अपने लोगों की जान गंवाई है। हम NEP का विरोध इसलिए कर रहे हैं क्योंकि तमिलनाडु ने दो-भाषा नीति को स्वीकार किया है। NEP कहता है कि तीन-भाषा नीति को स्वीकार करना होगा, जबकि संसद में तमिलनाडु को इस नीति से छूट दी गई। अब आप इस फैसले से छेड़छाड़ करना चाहते हैं। तो असल में राजनीति कौन कर रहा है? हम यह नहीं कह रहे कि हम पूरी NEP को नहीं मानते, लेकिन कुछ बिंदुओं पर हमारी आपत्ति है। हम नहीं चाहते कि पांचवीं कक्षा में परीक्षा हो। हम तीन-भाषा नीति को स्वीकार नहीं कर सकते। हम स्कूलों को केवल इसलिए बंद नहीं कर सकते क्योंकि वहां पर्याप्त छात्र नहीं हैं। हमारे लिए सबसे



महत्वपूर्ण बच्चों का भविष्य है न कि स्कूलों को आपस में मिलाकर खर्चों में कटौती करना।

■ आप कह रही हैं कि तीन भाषा फॉर्म्युला हिंदी थोपना है, लेकिन NEP में कहा गया है कि कोई भी दो भारतीय भाषाएं पढ़ानी चाहिए, यह जरूरी नहीं कि वह हिंदी ही हो...

आज हमारे पास AI है जो किसी भी भाषा को तुरंत अनुवाद कर सकता है। फिर एक बच्चे पर इतना बोझ डालने की क्या जरूरत है, जो पहले से ही साइंस, मैथ्स, फिजिक्स और लगातार नई चीजें सीख रहा है। आप कहते हैं कि हम हिंदी नहीं बल्कि किसी भी भारतीय भाषा को पढ़ाने की बात कर रहे हैं। लेकिन अगर कोई छात्र केरल में यह कहे कि वह अंग्रेजी, मलयालम और भोजपुरी पढ़ना चाहता है तो क्या स्कूल उसके लिए भोजपुरी का शिक्षक उपलब्ध करा पाएगा? या फिर बंगाली का शिक्षक? अगर सिर्फ दो-चार छात्र

ही इसे पढ़ना चाहते हों? यह व्यावहारिक रूप से संभव नहीं है। आखिर में क्या होगा? स्कूल केवल उन्हीं भाषाओं को पढ़ाएंगे, जिनके लिए टीचर पहले से मौजूद हैं। हिंदी टीचर की पहले से ही एक स्थापित व्यवस्था है तो हर राज्य को मजबूरन हिंदी को ही अपनाना पड़ेगा। हम देख रहे हैं कि हिंदी भाषी राज्यों में छात्र एक ही भाषा पर निर्भर हो रहे हैं, वे द्विभाषी भी नहीं बन पा रहे हैं। हम नहीं चाहते कि हमारे छात्रों के साथ भी ऐसा हो। रिसर्च में साफ है कि कई भाषाएं हिंदी थोपे जाने के कारण विलुप्त हो रही हैं।

■ केंद्र सरकार ने कहा है कि फंड तभी दिया जाएगा जब NEP लागू की जाएगी। आपकी सरकार इस पर कैसे आगे बढ़ेगी?

शिक्षा समवर्ती सूची (Concurrent List) में आती है। यह कोई ऐसा विषय नहीं है जो केंद्र सूची (Union List) में हो। इसलिए केंद्र सरकार को इसे किसी पर थोपने का कोई अधिकार नहीं है। आप यह नहीं कह सकते कि हमें NEP को लागू करना ही होगा। आप केवल हमारे साथ चर्चा कर सकते हैं। इसे हम पर जबरन थोपा नहीं जा सकता। यह असंवैधानिक है।

■ अगले साल विधानसभा चुनाव होने वाले हैं। इस मुद्दे का चुनाव पर कितना असर होगा? मैं इसे चुनावी मुद्दे के रूप में नहीं देखती, यह भावनात्मक मुद्दा है।

■ क्या तमिलनाडु के लोग वास्तव में हिंदी नहीं सीखना चाहते? हिंदी का इतना विरोध क्यों?

आप बताइए, हर किसी को हिंदी क्यों सीखनी चाहिए? यह क्यों नहीं पूछते कि मैं बंगाली या भोजपुरी क्यों नहीं सीखती? यूपी में लोग मलयालम या तमिल क्यों नहीं सीखते? आप यह क्यों सोचते हैं कि पूरी दुनिया को हिंदी ही बोलनी चाहिए?



14/3/25

With a scam casting a shadow over its credibility, the NAAC has started bringing about reforms in its assessment and accreditation process

Rooting out the rot in rating

RAKHEE ROY TALUKDAR

The credibility of the NAAC, mandated to assess and accredit higher educational institutes, has come under scrutiny after it had to fire 840 of its 5000 assessors for irregularities even as the Central Bureau of Investigation arrested seven members of its inspection committee for allegedly demanding and accepting bribes in exchange of ensuring favourable rating for a university. The organisation claims that it is putting in place a rigorous selection process to appoint assessors and follow the policy of 'Right Grade for Right Institute', but sceptics are not entirely convinced about the reform measures set in motion.

The NAAC appoints academics as assessors to visit higher educational institutions or HEIs, assess their credentials and certify them with gradings as part of the accreditation process. The vulnerability of the process to the menace of corruption came to the public domain when the CBI conducted raids at 20 locations early last month and unearthed the bribery scam. The officials of the Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation (KLEF) based in Guntur in Andhra Pradesh were also arrested for allegedly offering cash, laptops, and smartphones to the assessors. The scandal brought to light how some of the HEIs could use the power of money to manipulate the rating process and to get high NAAC grades to avail government funds and academic autonomy, apart from misleading parents and students.

However, even before the raids and arrests by the CBI, various committees have been pointing out lack of transparency and disproportionate assignment of assessors, as well as doubts over the authenticity of data submitted by the HEIs and the credibility of the Data Validation and Verification (DVV) process.

An expert committee, led by Prof J P Singh Joorel, in its report submitted in September 2022, pointed out the glaring shortcomings in the NAAC's assessment and accreditation process for the HEIs, including a potentially compromised ICT system. A report by

the Comptroller and Auditor General in 2023 pointed out cases of awarding "arbitrary grades" to several HEIs by the NAAC.

Bhushan Patwardhan, former chairman of the NAAC's Executive Committee, had flagged some of the malpractices, including large variations in data provided by DVV and PTV (Peer Team Visit) scores. He reiterated his concerns about awarding questionable grades to some HEIs in a letter to the UGC chairperson, M Jagadeesh Kumar, in February 2023, before resigning in March 2023.

Kumar, who is also the president of the NAAC general council, told *DH* that the assessment and accreditation agency was working on the recommendation of the committee headed by K Radhakrishnan for transition to a simplified system of classifying HEIs as 'Accredited' and 'Not Accredited'.

The NAAC informed all assessors in July 2024 that their performance was being monitored. Ganesan Kannabiran, the director of the NAAC, said that many of the 840 assessors axed by the agency recently had been under review even before the raids and arrests by the CBI. "We have initiated a two-tier evaluation process, wherever required. Now, if we find discrepancies in the Qualitative and Quantitative Metrics given by the DVV and the PTV and see high jumps in rankings, we put the HEI under review by a member of the Standing Committee," he said.

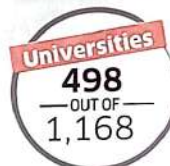
The NAAC tightened the DVV process and started insisting on affidavits from the HEIs. "We have onboarded 1400 new assessors who would now be trained, especially to follow the ethical codes," Kannabiran told *DH*. "After the reform measures were initiated, out of the 400 HEIs reviewed, 200 were re-reviewed before their grades were given out. We follow the policy of 'Right Grade for Right Institute'."

"Removing the corrupt assessors is a good step but I believe the institutes who were given high grades need also to be reviewed. A vigilance report of each assessor, to be cleared by regional centres, should also be made mandatory," said Patwardhan.

(The writer is a senior journalist)



NAAC accredited...



(SOURCE: DATA PRESENTED BY THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION IN RAJYA SABHA)

An autonomous body established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1994 to assess and accredit Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

NAAC assesses and accredits higher educational institutions using seven criteria...

- Curricular Aspects
- Teaching-Learning and Evaluation
- Research, Consultancy and Extension
- Infrastructure and Learning Resources
- Student Support and Progression,
- Governance, Leadership and Management
- Institutional Values and Best Practices



THE SCANDAL

Feb 1, 2025:

The CBI conducts raids in 20 places across the country and arrests 10, including members of a NAAC inspection team, for allegedly demanding and accepting bribes for giving a favourable rating to a university in Andhra Pradesh. The officials of the university were also among the arrested people.

Feb 5, 2025:

NAAC debars 7 members of its inspection team after the CBI unearthed the scam

Feb 26, 2025:

NAAC removes 840 peer assessors from evaluation duty for irregularities

Initiative for Reforms:

- The Union Ministry of Education in **November 2022** constituted a committee headed by **Dr K Radhakrishnan** to recommend reforms in the accreditation processes by NAAC and NBA (National Board of Accreditation) and the ranking system by NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework)
- The committee submitted its report in **November 2023**

NAAC proposed the launch of reforms in two phases...

- 1 Binary Accreditation Framework (BAF)**
Transitioning to a simplified basic accreditation system where institutions are classified as 'Accredited' or 'Not Accredited'
- 2 Maturity-Based Graded Levels (MBGL)**
Introducing a maturity-based accreditation (from Level 1 to 5) that assesses institutions based on their developmental stages

NAAC is also working on...

- Introducing multiple reviews to recheck assessments if and when discrepancies are found. Continuous monitoring of performance and conduct of assessors
- Implementing AI-driven digital platforms to streamline data collection, analysis, and reporting to minimise human errors and enhance efficiency
- Leveraging technology to conduct virtual evaluations, ensuring consistency and reducing logistical challenges and human interventions associated with on-site visits.

COMPILED BY RAKHEE ROY TALUKDAR

20/15/24

What about accreditation of accreditors?

FURQAN QAMAR

The NAAC is in the news these days for reasons that must make the agency and the academic community shudder.

As the NAAC contemplated acting on the Radhakrishnan Committee's report on reforming accreditation, it found itself embroiled in a graft scam. The chancellor of a university and a few officials were arrested for allegedly bribing the experts for higher grades than the institution deserved. Some of the concerned peer-team members were also booked for allegedly skimming favours in cash and kind.

The NAAC has acted speedily and taken more than 800 experts off its panel. How did it identify them so fast? Why did it wait for the taint to become public if the suspects were already known?

The NAAC would now be under pressure to effect select recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Committee. Accreditation will now be a two-step process: A mandatory binary accreditation followed by a voluntary maturity-based grading. The assessment parameters might be drastically diluted to make a much larger number of institutions qualify for accreditation. Peer assessment will likely go digital, eliminating the need for physical visits.

These measures may not necessarily help the NAAC fulfil its primary obligation of promoting quality and enhancing excellence in higher education so long as autonomy and empowerment continue to elude the agency.

The agency's foremost failing was the refusal of premier higher educational institutions, the Institutions of National Importance (INIs), to get themselves accredited by it for quality assurance. Even today, the IIMs, IITs, and similar institutions remain unaccredited.

Even if they did not intend to challenge the agency's competence and credibility, their decision and its acceptance by the NAAC, as well as the University Grants Commission and the Ministry of Education, signaled just that. The global higher education fraternity often quipped: How come the only national accrediting agency does not accredit the best higher education institutions in India?

While the best institutions boycotted institutional accreditation by the NAAC, it must be credited for its magnanimity in

involving its faculty members in the peer teams for assessment and accreditation of colleges and universities.

The second undoing of the NAAC was its decision to not only accredit but also grade institutions. For most accreditation agencies across the globe, the process is a binary one. They set a specific quality benchmark regarding input, process, and output parameters, and those institutions that cross the threshold level are declared accredited. Those who cannot are hand-held and advised to improve their quality to meet the prescribed requirements.

The NAAC faced much flak on this. Their grading pattern was challenged and had to be revised several times since its inception in 1994. Grading is a different ball game and requires a nuanced approach and methodology to gain acceptability. Repeated modifications in the parameters, scoring, and weight assignment made the process confusing and cumbersome.

Its biggest folly was to succumb to the suggestion that it should deviate from the global practice of accrediting institutions based on their self-assessment verified by an independent peer-team review comprising competent faculty members known for their high moral character and impeccable integrity.

It became a game for what came to be known in common higher education parlance as the DVV (Data Verification and Validation). Carrying a weightage of 70%, the task was outsourced to external agencies with limited knowledge or understanding of the higher education system. The weightage of the peer team assessment was reduced to a mere 30%.

Agencies and people alien to the higher education system were, thus, given preference over faculty members. This sent a loud and clear message that teachers cannot be trusted to be objective and unbiased. Most self-respecting quality teachers quit quietly and withdrew from the accreditation process.

Finally, the propensity to data fudging, manipulation and malpractices has increased since the ideas of graded autonomy and performance-based funding were linked to accreditation grades and ranking. Accreditation works best when it is driven by a sincere desire to improve quality, but for that, even the most robust systems could become susceptible to scams and scandals.

Above all, the biggest undoing of the agency was its reluctance to address a key question: What about accreditation of accreditors?

(The writer was a professor of management and the advisor for education in the Planning Commission.)

DN1519



K. Elango

In Homer's epic *Odyssey*, Zeus, the king of gods, laments, "Men are fools... They blame the gods for their misfortunes, ignoring our advice. They don't accept that their own foolish actions lead to their downfall." This exactly mirrors the plight of e-readers, whose psychic state resembles that of *Odyssey's* crew when their ship was tossed at the island of lotus eaters.

E-reading has rapidly emerged as the predominant mode of reading, subduing traditional print reading (p-reading) in less than two decades, facilitated by desktops, laptops, tablets and e-readers. More than these devices, smartphones have positioned themselves as the critical medium in this situation. It is rare to find someone's hands, pockets, or handbags free of them. In India alone, there were about 660 million users in 2024 and the number is projected to reach 1.2 billion by the end of the current year, due to the push towards digital literacy.

Problems

However, paradoxically, excessive screen exposure has led to a decline in both physical and cognitive prowess. Researchers predict that, by 2050, about 40% of children and adolescents worldwide would be short-sighted and every hour they spend with screens exacerbates the ailment. In addition, innum-

erable problems related to every dimension of life have been identified: neck pain, back pain, sleep deficiency, lack of concentration, alienation, aggression, depression ... the list is endless. These severely impact academic performances from a young age. Yet they are so intoxicated, any attempt at detoxification hardly produces any positive results.

Despite the necessity of smartphones, students mainly use them for entertainment, resulting in dopamine addiction. They scroll through social media at lightning speed, pause their eyes only for videos,

pictures, images, and photos, and any effort of reading terminates with the first three or four lines. Given that each on-screen line contains about six words, even a brief write-up appears humongous and remains unread. Juggling an average of five platforms, the avalanche of information they encounter leads to overload, lack of focus, off-memory storage, and an impossibility of retrieval, almost amounting to non-reading.

Also, with social media being carriers of misinformation and disinformation, they often consume the news at face value,

eventually leading to skewed perceptions, and creating a widening gap between real and the virtual reality.

E-readers have developed a disregard for books, dismissing them as 'boring' as they contain only a 'sea of words'. In contrast, e-texts are 'alluring' with their dynamic images, photographs, highlights, hyper-texts, appealing layouts, varying fonts and sizes, and real-time updates. These features often make them fixated. However, this phenomenon known as 'doomscrolling' certainly leads to 'brainrot'.

Benefits

P-reading, on the other hand, is a complex cognitive process, demanding a deep level of concentration. Decoding a text, namely, meaning-making, relies on prior knowledge (schema) a reader takes to it - inexperienced readers may be content with comprehending basic meaning, but they can graduate to advanced level through sustained effort. Reading involves multiple layers of interaction: at the end of a cline, readers can uncover hidden meanings, engage in inter-textuality to fathom similarities and diffe-

rences, generate parallel texts, sift facts from opinions, and appreciate sophisticated linguistic elements such as metaphors, allusions, ambiguities.

For an enriched reader, p-reading is not a shallow experience of absorbing information but a creative and critical cognitive odyssey; one that transports them to other worlds and, at the same time, get under the skin of writers. It encompasses a broad spectrum of multiple sub-skills, which are untapped in e-reading. To celebrate reading as an immersive and intellectually rewarding experience, it must be uncluttered with push notifications, advertisements, and not compelling us for likes, shares, and comments.

A decisive evidence to establish the superiority of p-reading can be found among countries that have promoted tech-centric education but are now on reversal course. In 2009 Sweden 'went all-in on digital education, ditching textbooks for screens' but is now investing 104 million to bring back textbooks having realised the detrimental effects on learners' reading and comprehension skills.

Truly, the shift is a wake-up call for e-readers to either switch to p-reading or strike a balance.

Views expressed are personal

The writer is a retired Professor of English and Chief Executive Chair of the English Language Teachers' Association of India

Internship portal

Henry Harvin Education has launched the Yuva Intern Portal, an AI-powered virtual internship platform offering more than 10,000 job simulations. It aims to offer structured internship programmes across diverse sectors such as healthcare, data analytics, software development, banking, finance, logistics, construction, media, and more.

For more details, visit yuvaintern.com



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

An odyssey of the mind

With e-reading becoming the predominant mode of reading, an educator lists the benefits of print reading

4/1/25

The challenges of public health education in India

The decision by the United States to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO) and drastically reduce the scale of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is one that has sent shock waves through the aid and public health world. This move has disrupted essential health-care services in many low- and middle-income countries. However, India has been largely unaffected, as international aid accounts for just 1% of its total health expenditure. Nevertheless, the cessation of such funding threatens to further shrink an already constrained public health development sector, which relies heavily on international support. More importantly, this development directly impacts the public health job market, reducing opportunities for thousands who are pursuing their Master of Public Health (MPH) and similar postgraduate courses.

Public health plays a critical role in shaping a nation's well-being and health-care delivery. The Constitution of India, through Article 47, underlines the state's responsibility to improve public health care. Public health is a specialised field that requires specific knowledge and skills to effectively address people's health needs. There is an urgent need for a dedicated workforce in India trained in public health, a fact that was very starkly realised during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond government systems, such a workforce is essential for civil society organisations, academic institutions, and research organisations engaged in public health.

The evolution of training and jobs in India

Though the surge in public health education in India is relatively recent, its history dates to the colonial era. In the early days, public health was largely embedded within medical teaching. This narrow approach persisted despite the establishment of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata in 1932 and the subsequent inclusion of preventive and social medicine – later known as community medicine – as an essential part of medical education. Specialists in community medicine, well-trained in public health provided public health services and met human resource needs in this field. However, their numbers were limited, and they were often engaged in medical teaching. Many students pursued MPH courses abroad in countries such as Australia, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the U.S. Yet, the supply of public health professionals remained constrained. Recognising the growing need and demand, MPH institutions and teaching expanded in India.

The number of institutions offering MPH and related courses in India has grown rapidly. Currently, over 100 institutions offer master's



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The key issue is the mismatch between supply and demand, with shrinking job opportunities and the dominance of the private sector

level courses in public health, whereas in 2000, there was only one. This expansion coincided with the launch of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005, which opened public health system roles to non-medical public health specialists. A wide range of institutions, from social science faculties to community medicine departments within medical institutions, have begun offering MPH courses. However, after an initial surge in demand, government recruitment for public health specialists plateaued, while the number of schools, programmes, and graduates continued to rise. As a result, securing jobs has become increasingly difficult for graduates.

Compounding this issue are challenges such as the lack of standardised training, insufficient practical learning opportunities, faculty shortages, and varied curricula that inadequately prepare students for real-world public health challenges. In addition, institutions offering public health courses are unevenly distributed, with large and populous States such as Assam, Bihar and Jharkhand, and many smaller and hilly States, having none or only a limited number of seats.

Hurdles graduates face, issues in education

The foremost challenge is the mismatch between supply and demand, with limited and shrinking job opportunities for graduates. Today, entry-level positions in public health, such as research or programme assistants, attract a very high number of applications, with a significant proportion of candidates being eligible. The success rate remains exceptionally low, with only a few positions available. Moreover, the shrinking of public health roles and institutions within the public system has further limited job prospects. Efforts to establish public health management cadres in States have been hindered by multiple factors.

In recent times, the changing landscape of health care, marked by the growing dominance of the private sector in public health, further restricts employment opportunities. The private sector prioritises hospital and business management professionals over public health specialists. With limited opportunities in both the public and private sectors, the research and development sectors remain the primary employers for graduates. However, these sectors rely largely on foreign grants, and India is no longer one of the priority countries for such international funders. Similarly, the development sector is constrained by limited funding, which is expected to worsen further due to recent decisions in the U.S. The national research and health development funding remains in its early

development and is significantly underfunded. Thus, the job scarcity for public health professionals continues and can exacerbate further.

Beyond job scarcity, there are concerns about the quality of MPH education. The rapid spread of public health schools has led to intense competition to attract students, often at the expense of compromising admission standards.

Many students enrol in these courses without a clear understanding of the field or passion needed to thrive in this field. Further, public health faculty often lack adequate training and real-world experience. The absence of a standardised curriculum and clear outcome measures, despite the Health Ministry's model course framework further exacerbates

concerns. In India, MPH courses are currently not mandatorily regulated by any regulatory body. Neither the National Medical Commission (NMC) nor umbrella organisations such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) oversee MPH training. In the absence of these quality measures, the overall quality of graduates is also impacted.

Approaches to consider

To address these challenges, a multi-pronged approach is required. The most urgent priority is to create public health jobs at all levels, from primary care to State and national health systems. In most developed countries with established public health education systems, governments are the largest employers of public health professionals. Similarly, establishing a dedicated public health cadre within State governments would be a significant step. This would not only create employment but also strengthen public health systems.

Next, a robust regulatory mechanism must be introduced by constituting a dedicated regulatory body or a specialised public health education division within existing regulatory agencies such as the NMC or UGC. This department, led by public health experts, should be responsible for setting curriculum standards and minimum training requirements while allowing room for institutional innovation, given that public health is a dynamic and evolving discipline. Moreover, public health training in all institutions must be closely integrated with practical learning opportunities within public health systems. There is a need to foster the growth of public health institutions in States where there are none or only a limited number. The emerging global situation calls for more national action and the building of local ecosystems for sustainable development in health.

4/1/25

BREAKING THROUGH

Performance of Indian institutions in QS ratings is heartening. They now need to reboot, improve learning experience

THE PERFORMANCE OF Indian institutes in the QS University World Ranking System, released last week, shows that their initiatives to upgrade the research ecosystem are yielding results. Nine institutes in the country figure in the top 50 and 79 Indian universities have made it to the list, up from 69 last year. Indian universities are particularly well represented in engineering (24 institutes), social sciences (20 institutes) and natural sciences (19 institutes). It's heartening that at a time when several reports and surveys have called out the skill deficit of Indian graduates, the QS survey speaks of the strides taken by the country's top universities to improve their standing among employers. However, QS 2025 also shows where the country lags in its endeavour to become a top knowledge economy destination. It underlines that India's elite universities need to improve student learning experiences and enhance their global presence.

The resources available to students for teaching, supervision and curriculum development play a crucial role in their learning experiences. The top runners in the QS ranking system have a near perfect score on that metric. The best Indian universities, in contrast, score between 10 and 20. Attracting an adequate number of qualified faculty and providing them with favourable working conditions has been a longstanding problem of the country's higher education milieu. In 2023, a CAG audit found that though the IITs have been recruiting faculty consistently, the pace of recruitment did not match student enrolment. This historical weakness has, however, never been scientifically quantified. In 2009, a task force set up by the erstwhile Ministry of Human Resource Development, called for "standing mechanism to monitor the size and quality of faculty resources and for data on faculty members to be made available on the website of every academic institution". This recommendation has, at best, been partially implemented. The government does collect faculty-related data for its Annual Survey of Higher Education. However, this is a voluntary process for institutions and the numbers are not verified by an independent agency.

The QS survey suggests that Indian universities could benefit from global collaborations which enable the "country's scholars to access a wider range of academic debates and discoveries". The National Education Policy too rightly emphasises the role of cross-border collaborations. The government has also invited universities outside the country to set up campuses in India. And, in 2023, IIT-Madras set up a wing in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Internationalisation is, however, a work in progress. The need of the hour is to liberalise the student exchange rules between Indian and foreign universities as well as build linkages with industry. Indian education administrators could perhaps do well to take cues from the 17-year-old tie-up between IIT-Bombay, among the consistent performers from the country in global ratings, and Monash University in Australia. If there's one message from the latest QS rankings it's this — top Indian institutes require more of such nurturing. That could provide them with the experience required to play a critical role in the education milieu — handhold the smaller universities that cater to the bulk of the needs of the country's aspirational classes. *5/17/25*

H-1B workers with master's degree doubled in 2020s from 2000s

HINDU (P-7), 18 MARCH 2025

Key facts about the H-1B program and its workers, as bipartisan calls for reform gain momentum in the U.S.

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

The landscape of H-1B visa approvals has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past two decades, according to data collated by the Pew Research Survey.

At the start of the millennium, 57% of approved H-1B workers had a bachelor's degree, while only 31% had a master's degree. By 2021, these numbers had flipped – only 34% held a bachelor's degree and 57% had a master's degree (Chart 1). This means that a four-year degree has become less sufficient for securing a visa.

In the 2000s, about 10% of approved H-1B applications were renewals, while most were new. By the 2020s, renewals had grown to one-third of all approvals (Chart 2). So, it has become increasingly tough for new applicants to secure a H-1B visa.

The denial rate for H-1B applications dropped to a record low of around 2% under former President Joe Biden, down from a peak of 15% during Donald Trump's first term. Under Barack Obama, it had fluctuated between 5% and 10% (Chart 3). This data gains prominence with Mr. Trump serving a second term as President, though Republicans are divided over the skilled immigration issue.

In the 2000s, Indians had accounted for 40-50% of approvals. This rose to over 70% from the mid-2010s (Chart 4).

In 2023, 65% of approved H-1B workers were hired for computer-related jobs. They also received a higher median annual salary than other job types, though managers had a significantly higher average salary (Chart 5).

In 2023, Amazon sponsored the highest number of H-1B visas (2.9% of total approvals), followed by Cognizant Technology Solutions, Infosys, Tata Consultancy, and Google (Table 6).

A profile of H-1B workers

The charts are sourced from Pew Research Centre's "What we know about the U.S. H-1B visa program"

Chart 1: The % share of H-1B workers approved each fiscal year whose highest level of education is a _____ degree

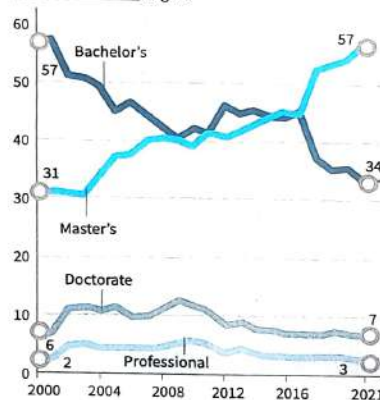


Chart 2: The number of H-1B applications approved each fiscal year. K=1,000

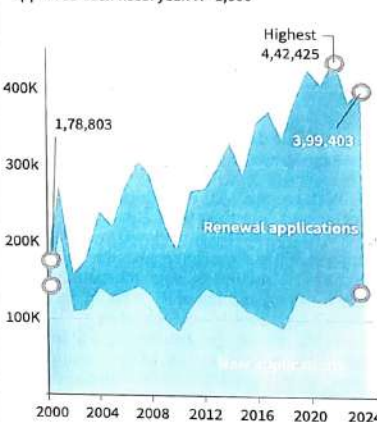


Chart 3: The % share of H-1B applications denied each fiscal year

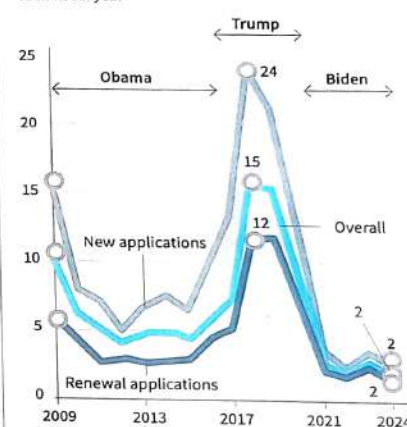


Chart 4: The % share of H-1B workers approved each fiscal year were born in _____

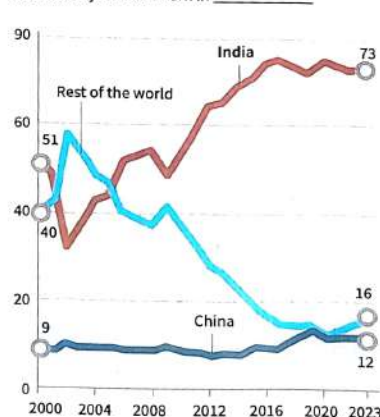


Chart 5: The % and median annual salary of H-1B workers approved in fiscal year 2023, by occupation

Occupation	% of H-1B workers	Median annual salary (\$)
Computer-related	64.9%	\$1,23,600
Architecture engineering and surveying	9.4	1,15,000
Education	6.2	69,700
Administrative specialisations	5	1,20,000
Medicine and health	4.4	1,04,900
Mathematics and physical sciences	2.7	1,22,600
Life sciences	1.9	81,800
Managers and officials	1.4	1,40,000
Miscellaneous professional technical and managerial	1.2	1,45,000
Social sciences	0.8	1,10,000

Table 6: Employers with the highest number of H-1B applications approved in fiscal year 2023

Rank	Employer name	Number of approvals	% of total Approvals
1	Amazon.com Services LLC	11,299	2.9%
2	Cognizant Technology Solutions	7,654	2%
3	Infosys Limited	7,349	1.9%
4	Tata Consultancy Services Ltd.	6,914	1.8%
5	Google LLC	5,465	1.4%
6	Microsoft Corp.	4,793	1.2%
7	Apple Inc.	3,821	1%
8	Meta Platforms Inc.	3,371	0.9%
9	JPMorgan Chase Co.	3,066	0.8%
10	Capgemini America Inc.	2,831	0.7%

MBA helps future-proof careers in the age of AI

The idea that the Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is in decline is exaggerated. In fact, the degree remains the most sought-after graduate credential worldwide. Since 2011, the MBA has been the most popular master's degree in the US and over 250,000 students enrol in MBA programmes worldwide each year.

Top business schools are seeing a rise in applications. In 2024, applications at US business schools grew by 12%, with elite institutions seeing even bigger increases. In India, over 330,000 students registered for the Common Admission Test (CAT), underscoring the degree's enduring appeal. This enthusiasm is backed by strong employability numbers. In India, employability among business administration graduates (78%) far outpaces the overall youth employability rate (55%). Top executives are more likely to hold an MBA than any other graduate degree. Employers continue to value the MBA as a signal of leadership potential, problem solving, and business acumen.

Does the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) reduce the value of the MBA degree? Far from it. Instead, AI is actually elevating the degree's value. Businesses across industries must navigate big changes as AI is poised to automate chunks of knowledge work, alter traditional business models, and reshape industries. While the impact of AI will be significant, we do not yet know the full pace and trajectory of AI adoption. For example, a senior executive of an organisation that is a global leader in the banking sector mentioned that their organisation was testing over 600 use cases of AI with the expectation that only 100 of them might pan out for implementation. Navigating such unpredictability requires training in decision-making under uncertainty — a skill that MBAs are trained in and one that is likely to become invaluable as AI and digital transformation technologies accelerate change.

A modern MBA also offers a well-rounded combination of soft skills, strategic thinking, AI and data-related technical skills, and functional competencies. Understanding when and what to automate, managing change, spotting opportunities for AI-enabled products and services, ensuring human

oversight, and adapting to regulatory requirements and ethical norms are all important leadership skills that will be much sought after. MBAs will be the change agents ushering in a new era of AI-driven business.

Placements at leading B-schools remain strong, with any downturns typically reflecting broader economic trends rather than a weakening of the MBA's value. MBA salaries (a unidimensional but nevertheless a much-followed metric) continue to rise, and B-school rankings emphasise salary growth over a five-year period to highlight long-term value. Overall, graduates benefit from career growth and long-term financial returns.

Beyond corporate careers, an MBA is increasingly valuable for entrepreneurs. While entrepreneurs don't need an MBA per se, entrepreneurs with MBAs increase their odds of success, benefiting from structured problem-solving, financial acumen, and leadership training. The future of work may see more professionals becoming free agents, or managers of "Me, Inc." and an MBA provides the skills to navigate that scenario.

According to a 2024 Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) survey of employers, strategic thinking, problem solving, technology skills, and AI proficiency are the most important future skills for MBAs. Employers

in South Asia rank AI competency among the top three skills. Leading B-schools recognise the need to adapt, and are embedding AI, digital transformation, and entrepreneurial thinking deeply into their curricula. A different GMAC survey in 2024 found that 42% of business schools now offer courses on AI-augmented decision-making and AI applications.

The Master of Business Administration may well be called the Master of Business Adaptability. As AI advances and reshapes industries, professionals will need broad-based business knowledge, execution chops, and leadership skills more than ever. The MBA remains the best bet for those who want to thrive in this new era.



Saravanan
Kesavan



Kashyap
Kompella

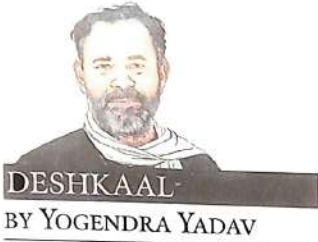
Saravanan Kesavan is dean and professor of operations and Kashyap Kompella is visiting professor of AI at BITS School of Management.

The views expressed are personal

HT/16

Lokbhasha, not rajbhasha

The Hindi policy followed in the past 75 years has served neither Hindi nor the country



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

LET'S END THIS farce of Hindi as *rajbhasha*, the ceremonial official language of the Indian Union. This abdication cannot do any harm to Hindi; the child-monarch-for-ever status has neither served Hindi nor the country. This titular demotion might connect Hindi to *bhashas*, the various Indian languages that share her fate. At the very least, it would remove the diversion of "Hindi imposition" that prevents any serious conversation about the real linguistic apartheid, the imperialism of English. And who knows, this might well be a step towards *swaraj* in ideas.

Let's face it: The Hindi policy followed in the last 75 years has been counterproductive. Hindi does occupy a special space in the linguistic diversity of India by virtue of its sheer size. With over 60 crore (42 per cent of the current population) speakers under the umbrella of what the census categorises as Hindi, it is the world's fourth largest language, way bigger than any other Indian language. Hindi can serve as a bridge in our multilingual landscape, provided it retains and nurtures its multilingual roots with languages subsumed within it and branches that reach out to other Indian languages. Conversely, a Hindi disconnected from its roots and branches can de-link India. A Hindi that seeks to remain "pure", assumes a higher status and demands respect from everyone else is bound to become a vehicle of communalism, accentuate a cultural rift and weaken national unity. So far, the tokenism of *rajbhasha* status for Hindi has achieved the worst of both worlds. As a result, Hindi is like the proverbial *sauteli ma* (stepmother) to its own languages and a failed *saas*, the proverbial Indian mother-in-law, to other Indian languages, with little to command respect. The BJP's latest Hindi push threatens to make matters worse.

In his poem 'Hamari Hindi', Raghuvver Sahay, the renowned poet, writer and editor, compared it to "dudhaji ki nayi bibi" — the young, new wife of an old, wealthy widower — who "over-talks, over-sleeps and over-eats". Her loveless world, full of envy, petty bickering and aggrandisement, captured the empty gratification of being Hindi in post-independence India. This reminds you of Fanon's description of the pathology of the Black oppressed.

Little has changed in the 60 years since he penned this poem. If anything, the hegemony of English is now cast in stone. Hindi speakers with whatever means have joined the national exodus towards English-medium schools. The "middle-class" elite in the Hindi belt would not be caught dead reading a Hindi newspaper. Their home language is now a diglossia of Hindi and English. Everyday signs of Hindi's subordination are now the furniture of our social life. Advertisements of English speaking courses. Parents presenting their children to the guests in "doggy English". Youth desperate to impress their boy/girl friends in broken English. If English looks up, Hindi lacks.

It has not been possible to teach the fourth largest language in the world in its own heartland. Let alone force others to do so. ASER surveys remind us that a majority of Hindi-speaking rural students in Class 5 cannot read a

paragraph from the Hindi textbook meant for Class 2. Most graduates from Hindi-medium colleges cannot get their Hindi grammar or even spellings right. Hindi has not produced or sustained an intellectual culture that anyone can look up to. Hindi writers continue to produce world-class fiction and poetry, but an educated person from a Hindi state would not recognise the name of a living legend like Vinod Kumar Shukla. There are some exceptional journalists, but not one newspaper of calibre. Forget cutting-edge science, technology or social science, there are no quality textbooks in any academic discipline to meet the pressing need of millions of students who end up doing higher education in Hindi medium. The last Hindi magazine that could serve as a carrier of ideas was *Dinmaan* (incidentally, edited by Raghuvver Sahay), which folded half a century ago.

In a country where students are fined for speaking Hindi at school, any talk of Hindi hegemony cannot but be a cruel joke. Hegemony presupposes effective control and cultural legitimacy. Hindi has none. English is the language of the Indian ruling class. It enjoys the cultural clout, the money, the backing of a very powerful education industry. Its dominance is accepted and internalised by those over whom it rules. That is cultural hegemony.

It would also be wrong to speak of Hindi dominance, brute power without legitimacy, except in one context. Notwithstanding the brouhaha of Hindi supremacists, the fact is that Hindi has not been forced upon non-Hindi speakers the way Russian was forced upon non-Russians in the USSR or Mandarin in Tibet. Just as well, since a respect for linguistic diversity has saved the Indian republic. The point about dominance is true vis-à-vis Urdu and about three dozen languages that were subsumed within Hindi and could well have become separate languages in their own right. In all fairness, in this respect Hindi is no different from most of the languages of the Eighth Schedule, each of which has subsumed several others.

There is some truth to the charge of Hindi imposition. While the promotion of the *rajbhasha* has done little to empower Hindi, the ritual visits by the *Rajbhasha Samiti* and cosmetic insistence on Hindi billboards and name plates does cause heartburn for non-Hindi speakers. Of late, all Government of India initiatives and schemes carry Hindi or Sanskrit

All the 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule should be given the status of official language. We do not need one national, official or link language. September 14 should be converted from Hindi Diwas into Bhasha Diwas, a day to celebrate all Indian languages. All Government of India attempts at Hindi promotion should be stopped. Bombay cinema, cricket commentary, TV news and soap opera have done more to promote Hindi than any official effort.

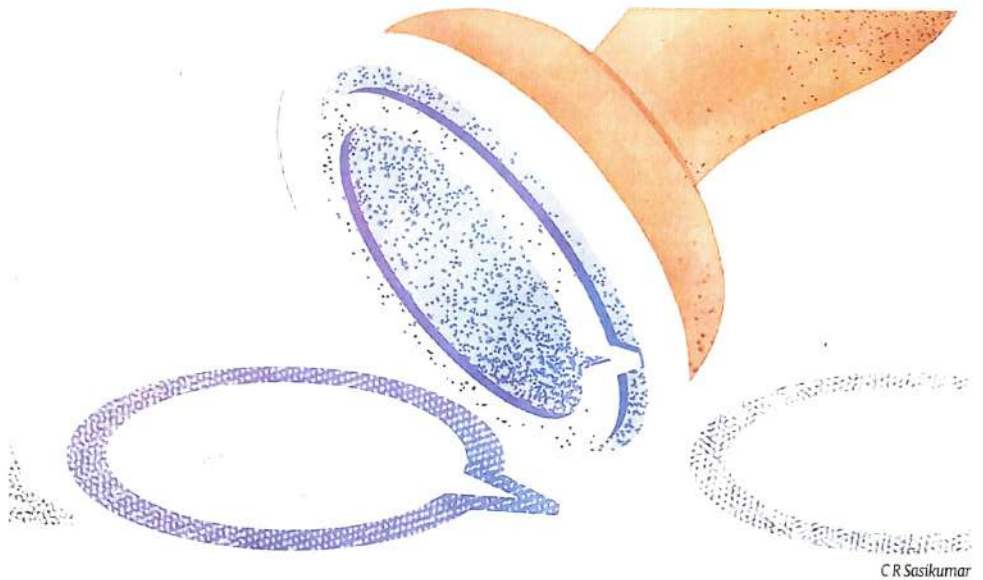
names, which must cause irritation. Hindi speakers make matters worse by claiming that Hindi is a "national language", a claim with no support in law or the Constitution, and by harassing non-Hindi speakers in public or semi-public contexts. This formal title, without power or authority, has resulted in weak power in limited official domains, which has proved counterproductive.

Here, then, is a proposal. All the 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule should be given the status of official language. We do not need one national, official or link language. September 14 should be converted from Hindi Diwas into Bhasha Diwas, a day to celebrate all Indian languages. All Government of India attempts at Hindi promotion should be stopped. Bombay cinema, cricket commentary, TV news and soap opera have done more to promote Hindi than any official effort. Promotion of Hindi should be left to the governments of Hindi-speaking states and to voluntary efforts. Those who need a link language should choose it for themselves. If it wishes to be a link language, Hindi must allow itself to be polluted by other languages and permit multiple registers of "correct" Hindi.

Instead of Hindi promotion, we should have a national mission for promotion of *bhashas*. The old Lohiaite slogan of "Banish English" won't work now. What we need is a "Build Bhashas" campaign. This would require large-scale, well-funded schemes to produce, translate or recreate children's books, higher education textbooks and scientific resources in all these 22 languages. This should be accompanied by generous state support for creating institutions to protect and promote at least 100 non-Scheduled languages, the so-called "dialects", carefully documented recently by the People's Linguistic Survey of India. The starting point could be a national resolve, encoded in the Right to Education, to provide primary education to each child in her mother tongue, in any Scheduled or non-Scheduled language.

Hindi is a *lokabhasha* and it is best that it remains so. And once we have this issue out of the way, can we begin discussing linguisticism, just as we discuss racism, casteism and sexism?

Yadav is member, *Swaraj India*, and national convener of *Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan*.
Views are personal



C R Sasikumar

A NOTE OF HOPE

A primary school in West Bengal has set up a mailbox to help students unburden. Change can start with a small step

LONG BEFORE FRIENDSHIPS became a click and a swipe away — easily gained, superficially experienced and just as easily forsaken — there was once the comfort of letters in which one poured one's heart out to a trusted confidante. The mailman was the conduit and when the response arrived, it brought with it the promise of a safe space. Those days of letter-writing might be in the past but the mental-health crisis in India, especially among the young, shows that the need for safe spaces has only grown stronger over time. For many young people, hidden under the weight of everyday life lies a world of emotional turmoil that they are too young, too scared, or too ashamed to articulate. A school in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, has taken a quiet step in addressing this crisis. It has set up the *mon peon-er* bag — a wooden letterbox that is fast becoming a repository of secrets at the government-sponsored Fanindra Deb Institution, where children from pre-primary to Class IV, mostly aged between five and 10 years, share their hopes, confessions, and deepest insecurities, often anonymously.

Implemented as part of a mental-health support programme, in the month since its inauguration, the initiative has seen nearly 100 notes in which students have spoken of all that they hold within — hopes for more games classes, distress over disputes between parents, longing for a parent who works in a different state or hurt against one who chooses work over family. The school plans to reach out to families, particularly of students grappling with parental conflict, to counsel them into negotiating domestic turbulence better. But more than anything else, what the simple act has done is to empower pupils to speak up — knowing that their voices won't go unheeded.

In a world that often rushes past the struggles of its youngest, the *mon peon-er* bag is a reminder that even the smallest gesture can spark profound change. In the vulnerability shared and the hope received, seeds of resilience and healing are sown, one note at a time.

16/10

Reclaiming education: The missing Gandhian link

India's post-independence education system was built with urgency but lacked the necessary foundation of values. By reconnecting with India's intellectual traditions and fostering inclusivity, the nation can reshape its education system to build a future rooted in both wisdom and progress

FIRST
Column

Educational endeavors in India immediately after independence were initiated hastily in an attempt to achieve too much in too little time, and that too under a severe paucity of human and material resources. This has proven to be too costly for the nation in the long run, as it now suffers from non-functional schools, absentee teachers, and proxy teachers.

My interpretation is that our teacher preparation institutions have either ignored, forgotten, or failed to appreciate the importance of the values that once brought the entire nation together. It was the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that fostered commitment, dedication, sacrifice, care for others, and a lifelong devotion to the nation. These are commonly referred to as Gandhian values in public discourse. Unfortunately, Gandhian values were neglected in practically every sector as successive generations took over the management of the nation.

The expectations from teachers and the education system have always been very high. They are supposed to set standards, norms, practices, morals, ethics, and values. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of eroding values has not spared the education system and its teachers. Eminent educationist DD Kothari aptly puts it: "The basic task of education—education at all levels—is to promote powers of the mind, the acquisition of special skills, and the advancement of knowledge. Above all, it should generate in the younger 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 the promotion of an abiding sense of ethical values and social responsibility as integral elements of education in any society, secular or otherwise."

This statement deserves to be read multiple times, and more importantly, it should inspire an intensive process of continuous reflection ('Manan') and interactive discussions ('Chintan'). A serious reassessment is required, beginning with schools and extending to institutions of higher learning. To contextualise this issue within the 21st century, let me briefly digress before returning to the focal point.

One outstanding individual who envisioned post-independence education in India with a deep understanding of both its past and present, while simultaneously foreseeing its future, was Dr DS Kothari. A great physicist, researcher, and legendary educator, his profound insight into spirituality and the Indian tradition of generating, transferring, and utilising knowledge—with the fundamental objective of serving the people—made him exceptionally suited for his role as Chairperson of the National Commission on Education (1964-66). This author had the privilege of attending some of



his lectures at NCERT and other institutions. It was impossible not to be impressed by his articulation, pragmatism, and vision.

For India, his prescription for the future was succinctly captured in four letters: "STPG". Yes, India and Indian education need to focus on 'Science, Technology, Production, and Gandhi'. It was more than five decades ago that this approach profoundly influenced my thought process, sparking a keen desire to comprehend it in the modern era—a time dominated by Western education, thought, and culture.

Kothari's prescription demanded a deep familiarity with Indian traditions and culture, a recognition of their historical challenges, and an incisive, unbiased analysis of Western knowledge systems—without either undue prejudice or blind admiration.

On a personal note, listening to Professor Kothari transformed my reading interests and my entire approach to educational reform. Several committee and commission reports have followed the Kothari Commission Report. These were necessary, as the pace of change, technology, and pedagogy



6

OUR TEACHER PREPARATION INSTITUTIONS HAVE EITHER IGNORED, FORGOTTEN, OR FAILED TO APPRECIATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VALUES THAT ONCE BROUGHT THE ENTIRE NATION TOGETHER. IT WAS THE LEADERSHIP OF MAHATMA GANDHI THAT FOSTERED COMMITMENT, DEDICATION, SACRIFICE, CARE FOR OTHERS, AND A LIFELONG DEVOTION TO THE NATION

demanding constant evolution. Terminology may change with time, but for India, it has always been the 'in-built dynamism and effective corrective procedures' within its eternal way of life that sustain it. This inner strength of the Indian education system has allowed it to withstand onslaughts from various directions.

Unfortunately, the "Gandhi" component of the STPG quartet proposed by Dr Kothari never received the attention it truly deserved. The neglect of Gandhian values is visible from schools to universities, with few exceptions. When one broadens their perspective, it becomes evident that this oversight has had far-reaching consequences. In simpler terms, one may ask: Has India ignored the fundamental purpose of education?

Within the education system, if one examines the implications closely, the focus will always return to teachers. Every teacher must constantly ask themselves: Are all Indian students, from their early schooling years—including home schooling—being taught in the same idiom (not language) that all religions are equal? That for me, mine is the best, and for my neighbor, his is the best for him? That our ultimate goal, regardless

of our religion, is the same?

It bears repeating that nearly every Indian teacher in a government school teaches a multi-religious classroom. Therefore, they must be well-equipped and personally convinced of the beauty of diversity in all its forms, including religious diversity. A teacher who acknowledges their responsibility as a creator of a united, integrated, and cohesive future for India must be aware of the vast treasure of great Indian scriptures, many of which are not necessarily religious but serve as guides for a 'contented, contributing, and creative' life. A teacher must be free from preconceived prejudices and biases. Those who are committed to this cause can seek guidance from an address Mahatma Gandhi delivered to students and teachers at Banaras Hindu University: "Early in my childhood, I felt the need for a scripture that would serve as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life. Today, the Gita is not only my Bible or my Quran, it is more than that—it is my mother." A large number of institutions are now engaged in in-depth research and serious studies on the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). One hopes that, despite misinterpretations of secularism, these studies will not ignore the importance of ancient Indian scriptures and their contemporary relevance.

Conclusion

India's post-independence education system, while ambitious, struggled with limited resources and a rushed implementation, leading to long-term consequences such as dysfunctional schools and a decline in values-based education.

The erosion of Gandhian values—commitment, sacrifice, and national devotion—has been particularly detrimental. Teachers, as moral and intellectual leaders, must be equipped to foster ethical awareness and social responsibility. Dr DS Kothari's vision of "STPG"—Science, Technology, Production, and Gandhi—offered a blueprint for India's educational growth. While science and technology have advanced, the Gandhian component has been largely neglected. This omission has impacted not only the education system but also India's moral and social fabric.

A reassessment is necessary, emphasising value-based education and religious harmony, ensuring that teachers instill the beauty of diversity and shared human purpose. Institutions now researching the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offer hope for reintegrating ethical wisdom into modern education. Only by balancing modern advancements with time-tested values can India cultivate an education system that nurtures both knowledge and character, securing a prosperous and harmonious future.

(The writer is a retired Principal/Chief Conservator of Forests, Head of forest force, Karnataka. Views expressed are personal)

The perils of imposing a language

Describing the DMK as secessionist over the 'Roo' issue betrays the BJP's centralising impulse



SOUTH SIDE

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

THE Tamil Nadu Government's use of the Tamil letter 'Roo' instead of the Indian currency symbol in the promotional logo of the state Budget has caused a nationwide stir. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the use of Tamil to denote the national currency was "more than mere symbolism", and that "it signals a dangerous mindset that weakens Indian unity and promotes secessionist sentiments under the pretence of regional pride".

State BJP president K Annamalai called it a 'stupid' move because of the DMK's rejection of a symbol that had been designed by a Tamil designer at IIT-Guwahati who also happens to be the son of a former DMK legislator.

'Roo' is commonly used for the rupee in Tamil. Its use by the DMK seemed intended to symbolise Stalin's pushback against the National Education Policy (NEP) over the three-language formula, seen as a move for a backdoor imposition of Hindi in the state. If the BJP is accusing Chief Minister MK Stalin of resorting to linguistic chauvinism to divert attention from the alleged failures of his government a year ahead of the Assembly elections, it can also be argued that in the high noon of Hindu pride, the DMK leader is not the only politician in the country to fall back on identity. The outrage over the DMK's actions seems disproportionate and selective. When will communal slurs and hate speech be described as a threat to India's unity?

is gearing up for a battle to secure a second term. Tamil Nadu has a penchant for chang-



GAMBIT: Tamil Nadu CM Stalin is not the only leader in the country to fall back on identity politics. PM

ing its government every five years. Only Jayalithaa was able to break the one-term jinx, leading the AIADMK to power for a second term in 2016. The DMK would be nervous, especially with the newbie Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam led by actor Vijay bringing a fresh element to old equations.

Instead of waiting for the BJP or other Opposition parties to set the agenda, the DMK has reached into its own arsenal and come up with language and delimitation. *Mozhi prachnai* (language issue) and *thokuthi prachnai* (delimitation issue) are now corner-shop buzzwords in the state. It is an earlier-than-usual buildup to the elections. The tall order, though, is to keep these issues going for another year. The opposition AIADMK and Vijay have no option but to support the DMK's stand on both issues. Indeed, the AIADMK, which could find itself in alliance with the BJP for the elections if the stars align, claims to be the first to have opposed the NEP in 2020, when the party was in power.

The nearly 100-year-old history of political resistance to Hindi in Tamil Nadu is well known. The

When will communal slurs and hate speech be described as a threat to India's unity?

puzzle really is why the BJP rekindled an issue that had lain dormant, by making the disbursement of Central education funds conditional on the state government adopting the NEP's three-language formula. For the BJP, which has dropped plenty of hints about its desire to 'Hindise' India — renaming the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code in Hindi in the name of decolonisation is one example — the dilemma is that backing down now would seem

like political weakness.

True, the NEP does not stipulate that the third language has to be Hindi. In practical terms, though, it would be Hindi. State schools would find it difficult, financially and logistically, to hire teachers for an array of third languages. And teaching Hindi would become the default option if only because — and here is the irony — Hindi teachers may be easier to find and hire in Tamil Nadu than say teachers for Malayalam or Kannada or even Telugu.

This is why Andhra Pradesh Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan is posing the wrong question. "Why do they dub Tamil films in Hindi for financial gains?" asked the newest ambassador for Hindi and Hindutva in the South, accusing the DMK of 'hypocrisy'. The short answer is that Tamil Nadu is not against Hindi. The opposition is to the imposition of Hindi.

Surprising as it may sound, lakhs of people in Tamil Nadu learn Hindi voluntarily. No political party or leader is stopping them.

The other side of the coin is that lakhs of north Indians arrive in Tamil Nadu seeking employment, speaking no lan-

guage other than Hindi. Forget that under the three-language formula, they did not learn Tamil in their schools in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. They are not being forced to learn Tamil to find employment in Tamil Nadu. Nor is there a diktat against speaking in Hindi in the state. Some may learn a little Tamil to get by. Their Tamil employers or colleagues or customers may try and close the communication gap with whatever Hindi they know.

A visit to any Chennai restaurant would be instructive — a north Indian waiter and a Tamil customer conversing in each other's language to ensure the food order is not lost in translation. It may not be the perfect *jugalbandi*, but it gets the job done. In the same vein, the long-standing collaboration between the Hindi and Tamil film industries is not hypocrisy, as Kalyan terms it, but an example of a voluntary, organic coming together of people for economic or social reasons.

Imposing a language, on the other hand, backdoor or otherwise, has never ended well. If Tamil Nadu's anti-Hindi movements of the past are not lesson enough on this, India's neighbourhood offers even more stark lessons about how the politics of national unity through a single language can go badly wrong. Pakistan practically lost its eastern part the day Urdu was declared the national language, just months after celebrating its creation in 1947. What began as a movement against Urdu culminated in the 1971 partition of the country, with India providing the final push. The 'Sinhala Only' legislation was the tipping point in the rift between Sinhalese and Tamils that led to a 30-year-long civil war.

Describing the DMK, which remains engaged with the Centre on all issues, including the NEP, as 'secessionist' for its use of 'Roo' betrays the BJP's centralising impulse and its view of regional parties in opposition to it. It also shows a dangerous disregard for history.

How GenAI is reshaping learning approaches

Automation presents opportunity but risks learning loss. Can students ace this race?

HOIMAWATI TALUKDAR AND
S SHANTHARAJU

The popular movie franchise *Mad Max* has a post-apocalyptic, dystopian setting and is themed around human survival against odds. It's a mirror to societal collapse due to war and human desire to possess wealth. Those who succeed in this possession will control the rest of the world and those who are not part of the troupe will have to exhibit their exceptional survival skills. In contemporary times, our constant interaction with Generative Artificial Intelligence throws at us an important question: Are we turning into the survivors of the wasteland portrayed in the *Mad Max* films?

Every user in the realm of AI is a Max because we are constantly swimming in the whirlpool of information. As a race, our constant need to compete with each other is fixated as it is the fittest who survives. From children to adults, from students to academics, from corporate workers to industry peers, we have all become a part of this degenerative, transformational race to conquer AI.

Understanding whether AI platforms are fighting with each other or with the human kind is a puzzle. Nevertheless, what is evident is the shift within technological infrastructure and the traditional workflow mediated by internet networks. The latest development in the GenAI world serves as a testimony to this argument. While ChatGPT was challenged by DeepSeek, Qwen 2.5 Max is a wild entry disrupting other GenAI tools in use. DeepSeek's newer versions R1 and V3 lead us to unknown terrains. The battle among these tech giants has been impacting the seriousness of the learning community. As the upgrades in automation bring a radical change, academics that were built through hard labour and time over centuries with meticulous scheduling are now lagging behind.

Peer pressure has been forcing students to disregard traditional learning

approaches. The crossover between disciplines is becoming increasingly common. We notice a steady increase in science students in humanities classes, some of them coming even from undergraduate engineering courses. As a result, there is an increasing demand for upskilling courses. Academics are compelled to include essential components of AI because the students are keen on learning – and are demanding – these sets of highly endorsed AI tools.

Students want to harness the most advanced skills that are relevant to the sectors they aspire to engage in. A couple of productive internships might help them enhance their employability but what, really, are their takeaways

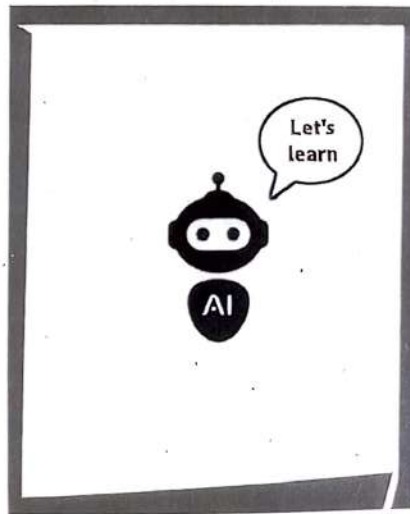
question: What role should our educational systems be playing? Should they be designed to bring about a change in society or is theirs a more functional responsibility that involves barely fulfilling the needs of a knowledge-based society?

The application of AI content in academics comes with its limitations just like it has its advantages. Some of the business giants are also predicting an AI deflation. Future roads that connect the digital world will be powered by AI which is embedded with constantly evolving learning algorithms. For every offline traffic system in the real world, we have traffic control points in the form of traffic lights that determine the pace, flow, and control of vehicles on the move. It is important to note that in the digital world, regulations are not being conceived with such intent or being implemented with the required alacrity.

India has been engaging with frameworks such as the Digital Data Protection Rules 2025. The government has pitched a model that seeks to balance innovation with regulation to protect personal data. In an emerging scenario where AI and processes involving consent are becoming central to the implementation of rules, policymakers will need to adopt a nuanced approach to regulation.

There is a huge opportunity and a learning loss taking place together. In the race to ensure new skills that are perceived as critical to employability, we could be undermining the very foundations and graduate attributes an educational institute wants among its students. There is a distinct possibility of every student becoming capable of learning any required skill while disregarding formal training. This presents an alarming situation to the academic community. The gap between the teacher and the student community is widening – concerted efforts to seek a middle ground need to be initiated. All forms of learning mediated by technology need to find boundaries through policies while the student-teacher exchanges demand a vibrant bonding as we seek a collaborative learning environment.

(The writers are faculty members in the Department of Media Studies, CHRIST Deemed to be University)



from these stints? – Do they learn something under the mentorship of seniors or do they merely help a startup increase its profits? In a race to enrich their profiles in the runup to their aspirational jobs, these students are losing the ability to relate to their peers and, probably, losing the opportunity to live as students, enjoying the privilege of being what they are.

Consent and regulation

For the students, escaping the pressure to embrace technology – as a tool to upgrade their employability – is becoming an increasingly tough ask. A recent case filed by a student against a university for failing him on the grounds that he submitted AI-generated assignments drives home this point. It is, again, time to address the all-important

Trump and the silencing of America's universities

The 1960s and 1970s saw a significant shift in the academic landscape, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. This period marked the emergence of a counter-western narrative, where third-world literatures gained prominence, and the master narratives of the West were challenged. As a result, the idea of independence, rewriting histories, and promoting democracy and freedom became increasingly important, as is evident in the student uprisings in the volatile 1960s. Students sought freedom in the classroom and university, leading to massive demonstrations against the establishment as well as against the Vietnam War. Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* became the seminal works introduced in the humanities curriculum.

These counter-narratives questioned the West's idea of white supremacy, describing the strife between the coloniser and the colonised, and paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse academic environment. However, the Trump regime is attempting to undermine this progress by suppressing such discourses of marginalised communities with its impact on universities in mainly two key areas of concern: the defunding of certain critical courses that oppose right-wing ideology, and the clampdown on Palestinian students and supporters of the Palestinian cause. Both issues are closely tied to the university setting.

The rise of the far right

Mr. Trump's administration has targeted university programmes and courses that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for defunding. Specifically, the subjects that may be impacted include: diversity and inclusion studies that promote multiplicity, equity, and inclusion on campus, and critical race theory that explores the intersection of race and power in society. Gender Studies, African American Studies, Latinx Studies, Asian American Studies and Native American studies may also face funding cuts, not only undermining academic freedom but also perpetuating a culture of ignorance and intolerance.

The rise of the far-right ideology, consequently, poses a significant threat to academic freedom and intellectual dissent, a danger to the emerging world order. Trumpism, with its emphasis on white supremacy, misogyny, and virulent nationalism, symbolises this significant threat. Its agenda to suppress research in "left-wing" areas is a blatant attempt to silence centres of higher learning and stifle critical thinking. This silencing is not new, as universities have historically been



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The implications of Donald Trump's orders extend to the world — supremacy, misogyny, and virulent nationalism threaten academic freedom, intellectual dissent and the emerging world order

sites of struggle for marginalised communities. But it is important to draw parallels between the current state of affairs and the post-independence era in universities worldwide, where there was a surge in studying African and Latin American literatures, gender studies and ecofeminism, Third World cultural studies and anti-war literature. These academic movements challenged dominant narratives and sought to dismantle the binary systems that perpetuated inequality and totalitarianism.

Revisiting Mr. Trump's last presidency, we see a strong leaning towards unilateralism, particularly in his immigration policies. His "America First" approach led to the implementation of several controversial measures, including the travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim countries and the construction of a border wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

And, more recently, he has gone after the Palestinian sympathisers. Understandably, Mr. Trump's immigration policies are deeply rooted in his nationalist and populist ideology, which emphasises the need to protect American jobs and culture from perceived external threats. This ideology has been criticised for being discriminatory and xenophobic, with many arguing that it is a form of ultra-nationalism that borders on Nazism.

Mr. Trump's presidency has been marked by several contentious executive orders, two of which sparked widespread debate and criticism. The first order, signed in 2017, banned immigration from several Muslim-majority countries, prompting a strong reaction from university presidents across the U.S. In a joint letter, presidents of over 50 universities urged Mr. Trump to rescind the order, arguing that it contradicted America's long-standing tradition of embracing diversity and welcoming people from various nations and faiths. They emphasised that immigrant students have significantly contributed to the country's growth in various fields, including technology, research, and labour.

Chill in the campus

However, a similar outcry was noticeably absent when in his second presidency, Mr. Trump signed another order that effectively targeted individuals guilty of being Palestinian sympathisers. Clearly, Mr. Trump's policies have had a profound impact on universities and international students, particularly those who speak out against injustice and promote diversity. The crackdown on Palestinian students and voices that counter Mr. Trump's views on Israel has created a chilling effect on campuses, with many students and faculty members fearing repercussions for

speaking out. This silence is particularly concerning, as educational institutions should be promoting diversity, inclusivity, and free speech, rather than punishing those who speak out against genocide. The irony is that America has greatly benefited from immigrant contributions to its economic, intellectual, social, and cultural progress.

But Mr. Trump's ideology has led to a surge in anti-Palestinian sentiment, with some politicians calling for the deportation of foreign students involved in pro-Palestinian protests.

This has created a culture of fear and intimidation on campuses. Many students and faculty members are hesitant to speak out against injustice, fearing that they will be targeted, harassed, or even deported. This is particularly concerning for international students, who may face visa restrictions, deportation, or other forms of retaliation for speaking out against Mr. Trump's policies. The silencing of dissenting voices on campuses has far-reaching implications for democracy, free speech, and human rights.

Part of a narrative

Mr. Trump's anti-immigrant discourse is not just about creating a scapegoat. It is part of a broader narrative that aims to re-establish nationalist patriotic values and targets globalisation. His opposition to uncontrolled immigration is linked to his critique of globalisation processes, which he sees as leading to job losses for American workers. This ideology has become a sort of new populist movement that is being embraced by right-wing movements in Europe and elsewhere.

In this context, the role of intellectuals becomes crucial in countering Mr. Trump's brand of leadership that rejects integration with other communities and promotes a selfish, self-centered agenda. It is essential for scholars, experts, and thinkers to mobilise public opinion, challenge discriminatory policies, and advocate progressive values, thereby recognising and taking a stand against the apartheid state engineered by Mr. Trump. As W.E.B. Du Bois asked, "If indeed what we confront is an apartheid state, then what is our responsibility as scholars and educators?" For him, universities are sanctuaries for marginalised communities, providing a forum for the public intellectual ready to speak truth to power and foster a culture of resistance and critical thinking, challenging dominant narratives, and developing pedagogies that promote social justice. Mr. Trump's agenda to suppress radical research or mentally stress students is a form of despotism with implications that extend beyond the United States, with many regarding them as a threat to global social order and human rights. n/6

Transforming education in a globalised era

FIRST
Column

True progress lies in integrating cognitive discourse, ethical values and innovative methodologies to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary demands. By fostering inclusivity and transparency, we can cultivate responsible, knowledgeable and globally competitive individuals

The increasing liberalisation and globalisation have fostered the concept of a global village, deeply interwoven with society, markets, freedom, choice, empowerment, peace, opportunities, and political linkages. However, its far-reaching impact has also created a somewhat confusing situation. Over the years, there has been considerable debate on reforms in education. It is crucial to identify new ways to assess candidates' qualitative competence by emphasising the improvement of their analytical and observational skills. This can be achieved through cognitive discourse, exploring multiple perspectives, and formulating integrated texts and questionnaires.

Students' lives are undergoing a significant transformation, largely due to rapidly changing value systems across the globe. However, this transformation, driven primarily by acquisition rather than genuine learning, risks turning education—a highly pious institution—into a business venture, where success is measured by material possessions alone. Our traditional knowledge system has long been known for embracing values and approaches that have nurtured students' creativity for centuries. Yet, we must acknowledge the challenges posed by the increasing complexities of this transitional phase.

Despite the historical challenges posed by imperialism and colonialism, our education system has grown richer in content and more diverse in ideas. Continuous efforts have been made to expose students to the nuances of socio-economic, political, and international issues. Kudos to the Ministry of Education for consistently updating curricula, placing a strong emphasis on enhancing students' comprehension skills, and fostering their all-round personality development. The introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) has provided a robust framework to upgrade, innovate, and evolve new educational methods. This ensures that our education system remains on par with the best in the world.

The inquisitiveness of the new generation is evident in their ideas and remarkable achievements globally. However, the demands of changing times and the rise of social media, coupled with its negative influences, have made students increasingly vulnerable to shortcuts, criminal activities, and anti-social elements. This has compelled policymakers to revisit the glory of our traditional education system, which is rooted in immense knowledge and wisdom. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is a commendable initiative in this direction. Its mission aims to create a confluence between our rich traditional values and modern educational advancements. This can help cultivate a culture of liberal literature and



SUDHIR
HINDWAN

nurture a spirit of selfless service and brotherhood.

Recent transformations in India's higher education system deserve applause. Efforts have been made to ensure equitable access and partnerships among institutions, demonstrating a strong commitment to empowering students and faculty members. Additionally, the NEP's emphasis on school, adult, and higher education, as well as the promotion of Indian languages and online learning, signifies a tremendous effort to enhance the overall educational landscape.

enhance landscape.

The essence of these reforms is to ensure clean governance and accountability in education while maintaining synergy among various stakeholders, particularly the youth. Establishing clear norms for structuring new educational frameworks ensures affordability and promotes social justice. Many positive changes have been implemented through fresh perspectives.

Another welcome regulation is the introduction

STUDENTS' LIVES ARE UNDERGOING A SIGNIFICANT TRANSFORMATION, LARGELY DUE TO RAPIDLY CHANGING VALUE SYSTEMS ACROSS THE GLOBE. HOWEVER, THIS TRANSFORMATION, DRIVEN PRIMARILY BY ACQUISITION RATHER THAN GENUINE LEARNING, RISKS TURNING EDUCATION INTO A BUSINESS VENTURE

of monitoring mechanisms that assess institutions based on research output, academic excellence, industry linkages, and employability. The clear framework for decision-making regarding the establishment and closure of institutions ensures transparency.

There has been considerable debate among academicians regarding selection processes in higher education.

One of the major challenges is adapting selection criteria to the contemporary context of increasing global interdependence. Recent developments have laid the foundation for a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of politics and society.

However, modifying the examination system is crucial, without it, reforms may remain theoretical rather than practical. The strength of the higher education system lies in fostering internal dynamism and ensuring inclusive growth. Even the best systems are shaped by the people who drive change.

Tremendous efforts have been made to create a robust higher education apparatus, yet there is always room for improvement to make the sys-

tem more cost-effective and people-centric. Academicians play a vital role in this fast-changing world, which faces increasing challenges from cyber fraud, the misuse of artificial intelligence, and the influence of social media. The blurred distinction between virtual (real) and real life is a growing concern. As bearers of wisdom and sacrifice, academicians must relentlessly pursue knowledge, contribute to society, and help students navigate the paradoxes of the transitional phase.

Students should be encouraged to engage in practical learning experiences that bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications.

A constant focus on conceptualising knowledge can help students carve out a niche for themselves. Since the ultimate goal of life remains happiness and contentment, we must delve deep into the vast ocean of knowledge and retrieve the pearls of forgotten wisdom.

Conclusion

The transformation of India's education system, driven by globalisation and policy reforms, reflects a broader shift toward a more inclusive, innovative, and skill-oriented framework. While challenges persist, including the commercialisation of education, social media's negative influence, and the evolving global landscape, the efforts to modernise learning while preserving traditional wisdom are commendable.

The National Education Policy (NEP) has laid a strong foundation for enhancing analytical skills, fostering research excellence, and improving employability. A well-balanced approach—integrating cognitive discourse, ethical values, and advanced methodologies—can bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and contemporary demands.

The role of academicians remains crucial in guiding students to think critically and engage meaningfully with society. With a focus on inclusivity, transparency, and lifelong learning, India's education system is poised to create a generation of responsible, knowledgeable, and globally competitive individuals. Ultimately, education should not merely be a tool for financial success but a means to cultivate intellectual curiosity, selflessness, and a deep appreciation for knowledge.

As we continue to refine our educational policies, the goal should be to nurture individuals who contribute positively to society while upholding the rich legacy of Indian wisdom.

A holistic, student-centric approach will ensure long-term success and sustainable progress.

(The writer, a recipient of the Bharat Gaurav Award, is a professor. Views expressed are personal)

Is the APAAR ID for students mandatory?

What does APAAR stand for? What are its touted benefits? Are State governments and school authorities pushing for its large-scale adoption? Is the collection of personal data of minors without a backing law constitutional? What are digital activists saying?

EXPLAINER

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

Activists and parents are worried about the rapid push by schools to generate an APAAR ID. APAAR is part of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020's record-keeping reforms, and while it is voluntary, States and school authorities have pushed students to enrol in it.

What is the APAAR ID?

APAAR stands for Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry. The registry enables what the government describes as the 'One Nation, One Student ID', in order to "accumulate and store [students'] academic accomplishments, facilitating seamless transitions between institutions for the pursuit of further education". The APAAR ID is linked to Aadhaar and is stored in the DigiLocker. The registry provides students with standardised data on their marksheets and institutional affiliation. The system is touted as a way for different educational institutes to rapidly process and verify any given student's academic transcripts. APAAR is generated through the Unified District Information System For Education Plus (UDISE+) portal, which contains regional academic statistics and data on schools, teachers and students.

The ID is a key aspect of NEP 2020's mandate to overhaul education data collection for policymaking and analysis. The Education Ministry has been pushing schools affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to get "100% saturation" with respect to students registering for an APAAR ID.

Is APAAR mandatory?

APAAR is not mandatory, according to a document posted on the ID's official site. However, circulars by the CBSE, and FAQ pages that have been published by the government, do not make this clear. The



New IDs: Students at a school in Governor Peta, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh on March 15. G.N. RAO

government has instead described the benefits of APAAR to students, such as permanently recording data on "transfer from one school to the other, entrance examination, admission, job application, skilling, upskilling," and so on. While there is no law mandating its use, the CBSE and States like Uttar Pradesh have laid out expectations to schools, under their umbrella, that the ID should be issued to all students. Parents often do not receive any information which clearly spells out that the programme is voluntary. The Union government re-confirmed the optional nature of APAAR in response to a Parliament query in December 2024.

What about data security?

There is still a lack of clarity over the genesis of the APAAR programme. When the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF)

attempted to file a Right to Information application on its policy documents, the Union government transferred the advocacy's application over 30 times, with no clear answer for months. "The datasets slated to be collected through APAAR enrolment are not limited to just educational certificates and grades, but spread far and wide," the IFF wrote in 2023. Besides, the large-scale collection of data of minors without a law to back it up, the IFF argues, is unconstitutional. Moreover, teachers have questioned the need for APAAR, arguing that the data that APAAR collects is already collated by teachers for the UDISE+, thus duplicating a significant amount of administrative work in schools.

"Additionally, Section 9(3) of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 specifically prohibits "tracking or behavioural monitoring of children or

targeted advertising directed at children" by entities," the IFF points out. "Having open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) and channels of data sharing without any robust safeguards, can expose children's data to third parties who may use it for such purposes. Before it is rolled out, any such interfaces must be secured and legal safeguards put in place. There is an added responsibility on the APAAR framework to ensure cyber security, as the data being processed pertains to children..."

How is an APAAR ID generated?

Teachers and schools are taking the lead in guiding parents to generate an APAAR ID for students. Schools verify a student's "demographic details," that is, their name and date of birth. Parents are then required to fill a consent form, and after another step of authentication by the school, the APAAR ID is generated. Some parents have flagged issues regarding the mismatch of names in school records and identity documents. "The user must correct the inaccurate data and resubmit their request to generate the APAAR ID", an official document states.

Is there a way to opt out?

Parents have the option of writing to schools and opting out of generating the APAAR ID for children in their care. The Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) has provided a template on its website which parents, wishing to opt out of the scheme, can edit and send to their schools.

However, recent developments are increasing pressure on parents and school authorities at the local level to ensure APAAR generation. For instance, Uttar Pradesh has warned of "mismatch" between APAAR generation and school enrolment data, in spite of the voluntary nature of the programme, and threatened to de-recognise some madarassas that have not started the process. A digital rights advocate said that so far, parents have had success in persuading schools to opt out by providing relevant paperwork to show the voluntary nature of APAAR.

THE GIST

APAAR is not mandatory, according to a document posted on the ID's official site. However, circulars by the CBSE, and FAQ pages that have been published by the government, do not make this clear.

When the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) attempted to file a Right to Information application on its policy documents, the Union government transferred the advocacy's application over 30 times, with no clear answer for months.

Parents have the option of writing to schools and opting out of generating the APAAR ID for children in their care.

In US, the campus test

Trump administration's crackdown on universities could make US less attractive to students and scholars from elsewhere and dampen spirit of free enquiry that makes institutions great



SANJAY REDDY

LAST WEEK, US universities came in for a shock. Why is this global news? Seven of the 10 highest-ranked universities in the world and 23 of the top 50 are in the US, according to the Times Higher Education Supplement. US prominence in higher education has been long-standing and has underpinned its economic success. The US has grown even richer in comparison to other developed countries over the last two decades and much of its increase in wealth has arisen, directly or indirectly, through spillovers from university towns to "tech industries".

Places like Palo Alto, California and Cambridge, Massachusetts are bywords for higher education, prosperity and technological innovation. But the US is also a centre of the social sciences and humanities. In these fields, true excellence and proximity to the organs that legitimate and disseminate ideas have always been hard to tell apart. However, it is clear that the concepts, ideas and themes that emerge from the country are still central to global discussions. US universities play a prominent role in the production of not merely governing but also critical perspectives, most recently concerning US policy on Israel and Palestine.

The intellectual prominence of US universities in science and technology on the one hand, and the social sciences and humanities on the other, cannot be teased apart. The atmosphere of formally free and open enquiry that has allowed for governing ideas and critical currents to be present has also (alongside plentiful financial resources and dense networks of expertise) underpinned their success in these diverse areas. It is for this reason that academics at US universities have reacted with alarm to the detention of Mahmoud Khalil, a student at Columbia University who was prominent in leading protests against Israeli actions in Gaza. What has deeply concerned many, even those with differing views, is that Khalil has not been charged with a crime nor prosecuted but summarily detained and threatened with deportation due to purported harms that he has caused to US foreign policy interests.

Despite the suggestions of some that he acted criminally during the protests, there has been no public test of this assertion. As a result, there is the unmistakable impression that he is being targeted mainly for his views, on the basis of a particularly narrow interpretation of US foreign policy interests. Moreover, this has occurred despite his being a legal permanent resident, or Green Card holder, which in the past was thought to provide both procedural and substantive assurances, including the freedom of speech claimed by US citizens, short of having been charged with a serious crime.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that Khalil's detention was no error, characterising him, without providing evidence, as a supporter of terrorism. A judge has temporarily halted Khalil's removal, but the consequence has been to generate large protests. Columbia University has been weak in its response, seemingly seeking to avoid fur-

ther attacks. It has already been met with the removal of more than \$400 million of federal funds by the Trump administration for its supposed failure to address antisemitism on campus, apparently based largely on a conflation of antisemitism with protests (in which many Jewish students and faculty have been involved) against Israel's actions in Gaza.

Subsequent communications from the US government to the university have underlined an unprecedented range of demands, entering into areas usually considered to be domains of academic and curricular sovereignty, such as the administration of the department concerned with Middle Eastern, African and South Asian Studies. Columbia University's is a test case, but the government has indicated its intention to undertake similar scrutiny of, and actions against, a large number of institutions. Although done in the name of policing improprieties and restoring order, taken together these actions might be said to be an attack on the institutional independence of universities and, indirectly, on the freedom of thought and speech of their members, through the chilling effect they are sure to generate.

Understanding the underlying reasons for the Trump administration's actions requires comprehending the attitude of populist nationalist movements everywhere toward universities. In their picture of the world, universities are valuable insofar as they produce useful knowledge that can be harnessed, especially in technological and managerial applications. The idea of a university as a free space in which knowledge is furthered for the sake of humankind or as an end in itself, and contrary ideas are tolerated and even nurtured as a condition of freedom and a route to enlightenment, is denied or repudiated. This expansive vision is viewed as a pointless indulgence, if not a danger to society. Universities are viewed as coddled and subsidised entities and their protesting students as ungrateful parasites.

In this view, the sooner order is brought back to them, the better, so they can focus on what really matters, and their proper purpose. It also views universities as the limit case of freedom in society. Freedoms are seen as being excessive and necessary to rein in everywhere, beginning with those places where they are most visibly experienced. These freedoms are also seen as properly the inheritance of insiders — citizens — with the circle of inclu-

Freedoms are seen as being excessive and necessary to rein in everywhere, beginning with those places where they are most visibly experienced. These freedoms are also seen as properly the inheritance of insiders — citizens — with the circle of inclusion being increasingly tightly drawn, now excluding even long-term permanent residents and others legally present in the country, however integral they may be to particular institutions of society such as the university.

sion being increasingly tightly drawn, now excluding even long-term permanent residents and others legally present in the country, however integral they may be to particular institutions of society such as the university.

The difficulty with this perspective is twofold. First, it misunderstands what a university is, and the basis of its ultimate success. By attacking the aspects of universities it dislikes, it threatens to undermine the ultimate basis of their intellectual vitality. While it is right to be concerned about the consequences of universities becoming political battlegrounds, it is wrong to think there is an alternative, given that society itself is deeply polarised. The clear and present danger is that the US becomes less attractive to students and scholars from elsewhere, who form a substantial part of its great universities, and that the spirit of free enquiry that makes their greatness possible is dampened. The links with tangible consequences are elusive but real.

Second, it threatens to sacrifice all the fruits of a free society in the process, including the ability to question that makes possible course corrections, even and especially when there are entrenched policies and dominant perspectives. The protestors in American universities have, after all, not merely been issuing a *cri de coeur* about murderous excesses (which makes it unsurprising that the protestors at Columbia named a building they took over "Hind's Hall" after Hind Rajab, the five-year-old girl killed by Israeli fire) but are also implicitly raising a question about what a proper view of the interests that guide US policy should be.

The issue that is now central is not whether protestors who broke laws can be tolerated — if so, they could be charged and prosecuted. It is rather that of whether views that the US government judges to be at odds with its current domestic or foreign policy goals can be a reason for summary action, with little restraint of procedure or law. At stake is the very existence of a free society, of which free universities are a part. Whether this threatened descent can be held at bay will offer crucial lessons for India, and every other democratic society.

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C R Sasikumar

A role for private schools in transforming education

India's school education system has seen multiple reforms since Independence, yet the crisis in learning outcomes persists. While access has expanded, foundational literacy remains low. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) yet again highlights how nearly half of class 5 students struggle to read a simple class 2 text. Unlike China, which reaped the benefits of strategic investments in elementary education over decades in the 20th century, India is yet to take a data-driven approach to school education reform. The country's absence from global assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since 2009 only delays the reality check we need. Without a structured approach to assess and correct course, systemic change will remain distant.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges these gaps and proposes significant reforms — from third-party assessments to technology integration in K-12 (kindergarten to class 12). However, execution still lags. None of the four key themes of the NEP can be addressed in silos. An education system that struggles at the foundational and ecosystem level can't deliver the structural transformation we need to meet the Viksit Bharat goal.

Against this backdrop, the role of private schools has expanded significantly. With the State gradually stepping back, private institutions have filled the gap. Today, over 50% of children in several states attend private schools. However, the sector remains fragmented, limiting spread of innovation. Schools compete rather than collaborate, and successful models often remain confined to a handful of institutions. But many private schools have also introduced multilingual education, international curricula, and global exposure, preparing students for an interconnected world. Collaborations with ed-tech companies have made classrooms more engaging, personalised and future ready. These gains, however, are unevenly distributed, primarily benefiting urban, high-fee schools.

A strategy of defining an elevated purpose and responsibility, reinforcing trust, promoting data-led public-private-private engagement is crucial.

Defining an elevated purpose and responsibility: Governments often deprioritise long-term systemic reform. This is where private schools

must step up — not just in improving their own institutions but in shaping the broader ecosystem. While they run as social enterprises, most have the resources and flexibility to drive change. They must do so with a sense of responsibility that goes beyond commercial interests. And these schools, despite private ownership, must see themselves as essential partners in nation-building.

Reinforcing trust: Despite their contributions, private schools continue to be viewed with scepticism. The dominant narrative — and in many cases, rightly so — frames them as profit-driven entities. Regulatory policies often reinforce a transactional approach, limiting deeper collaboration. Yet, history shows that private initiatives have driven innovation in other sectors. The school system cannot afford to remain an exception.

Data-led engagement: We should change how the State, private schools, and edtech companies engage. A new model of partnership, built on performance orientation and shared accountability, is essential. While the State can create and transparently run such models, private schools too must move beyond their vendor mindset and work with private partners within an enabling framework that prioritises learning outcomes, competency-based education, and employability. We must bring in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven assessments, adaptive learning, and person-

alised instruction to scale quality education. This is a long overdue need to drive innovation in India's school education system.

The urgency to act cannot be overstated. India's demographic window of opportunity is shrinking, and if it is to achieve the Viksit Bharat vision by 2047, school education must be reimagined. The role of private schools must go beyond being centres of academic instruction to becoming hubs of innovation, data-driven decision-making, and large-scale transformation. By reimagining how they engage, with more trust and an elevated sense of responsibility, they can address our learning crisis and create thousands of schools of the future.



Hemant Joshi



Saubhagya Raizada

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How NEP bridges the education-employment gap



JASWINDER SINGH BRAR
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THE draft of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) attained finality after five years of consultations under the leadership of former ISRO Chairman K Kasturirangan. The policy was adopted by Parliament on July 29, 2020, thereby replacing the National Policy on Education of 1986.

The necessity for a paradigm shift stemmed from the critical challenges in educational dispensation. It was felt that the existing policy had been losing relevance, with the emergence of a growing army of unemployable job-seeking graduates who did not have the relevant skill set and knowledge base.

The policy was not in tune with the requirements of the knowledge economy of the 21st century, which is based on the market being the anchor of economic decision-making. The 'massification' of education with selected schemes, interventions and programmes with 'compromised quality' had resulted in what is called 'degree inflation'.

During this period, only a few Indian universities got recognition in the global rating and accreditation systems.

Ironically, the non-absorption of graduates into jobs as per the qualification certificates has often been sighted as a shortcoming of the growth model adopted since 1991.

The NEP-2020 is structured around the five core principles of access, capacity, quality, affordability and accountability, all aiming to align with the emergent socio-economic and global demands. Its vision has been operationalised by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) developed by the Kasturirangan-headed 12-member committee.

The policy acknowledges the inter-connection and mutual dependence among various stages and domains of education. The outputs of different stages and subsectors of education serve as inputs for the subsequent stages.

The NEP-2020 aims to draw its strength from a multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary process of learning, skilling and knowledge acquisition. To achieve this, the policy emphasises the replacement of the rigid structures of the old system with flexible ones. This transformation has to be facilitated through a robust digital infrastructure, system of academic credits and awards, a blended mode of learning, the initiation of more liberal subject combinations and boosting academia-industry interactions.



VITAL: NEP draws its strength from a multi-disciplinary process of learning and skilling. TRIBUNE PHOTO

The policy upholds the Kothari Commission (1968) and subsequent education policy recommendations (1986, revised version 1992) to invest up to 6 per cent of the GDP in the education sector by the Centre, states and union territories' budgets. Notably, the public expenditure by the education department and other government departments on education and training in their respective domains was equivalent to 4.04 per cent of the overall GDP of the country during 2019-20, which constituted 13.03 per cent of the overall budgetary expenditure. Further, during the same year, 24.67 per cent of the overall budgetary expenditure on education (by education and other departments) was incurred by the Central government and the rest by the states and UTs.

Following the new policy, the educational landscape, more particularly in the higher edu-

cation domain, has gone through cataclysmic changes.

A student's learning experience gets a boost when he is allowed a chance to creatively combine the core domain knowledge with other subjects of his choice. The cross-fertilisation of ideas with greater conceptual clarity breaks the mental silos. The NEP-2020 enables this through the multi-disciplinary higher education framework, portable credits, multiple entry and exit options and re-entry provisions.

The policy also introduces a structured certification system where students receive certificates, diplomas and degrees based on the duration and extent of the completion of their under-graduate course.

The policy seeks to synchronise India's higher education sector with the global best by incorporating flexibility in both classroom and experiential learnings. To improve educational management,

technology has been introduced for the digital storage of credentials, along with the facilitation of online and offline learning by transferring the credits earned.

The policy also envisions that the affiliation of colleges will be gradually faded out by granting graded autonomy. Further, standalone institutions will be encouraged to evolve into multi-disciplinary institutions through strategic collaborations, dual-degree programmes, joint research activities and international exchange programmes.

Flexibility and multidisciplinary approach are the hallmarks in the design of educational programmes, learning strategies and career pathways under NEP-2020. A well-developed higher education system contributes to national growth by supplying a skilled workforce. It also holds intrinsic value as a global industry.

The NEP-2020 holds transformative potential as it unfolds. However, its success hinges on its execution, requiring high standards of implementation, rigorous monitoring and consistent reinforcement. Recognising these aspects, policymakers have facilitated dialogue among stakeholders and also conducted reality checks by collecting data via digital portals.

The NEP-2020 must adopt a flexible framework that fosters competitiveness, enabling institutions to attract teaching and research talent and offer meaningful

student incentives.

A key challenge for any policy is overcoming the psychological barrier of the 'announcement effect', which often triggers scepticism among stakeholders. Well-intended reforms risk trivialisation as opportunistic actors repackage old routines as new initiatives. Such probability is high in curriculum-designing, evaluation, assessment and pedagogical practices.

One of the most pressing concerns is curriculum-modernisation as institutions are not accustomed to designing syllabi in a modular format, where the level of complexity increases progressively at every stage. Additionally, resource constraints are an impediment for many institutions, impacting lab infrastructure, internship programmes, training and mentorship initiatives.

Further, institutions need to evolve a mechanism that goes beyond traditional written tests, where students can showcase their skills through practical applications, projects and problem-solving to acquire real-world competencies. This needs more public funds, alumni contributions, industry partnerships, community involvement, donations, etc.

Thus, sustained efforts in governance, faculty training, industry collaboration and student skill development are essential for translating the ambitious vision of the NEP-2020 into a tangible educational transformation.

A student's learning experience gets a boost when he is allowed a chance to creatively combine the core domain knowledge with other subjects of his choice.

अपने दायित्व को समझें शिक्षा संस्थान

आज भारत तीव्र परिवर्तन की प्रक्रिया से गुजर रहा है। यह परिवर्तन सामाजिक, सांस्कृतिक, आर्थिक एवं राजनीतिक सभी दिशाओं में हो रहा है। इन क्षेत्रों में परिवर्तन हम कई बार देखते हैं, पर उन्हें समझ नहीं पाते, जबकि यह 'परिवर्तन का दौर' है। भारतीय समकालीन आधुनिक इतिहास को तीन रूपांतरकारी दौर में बांटा जा सकता है। पहला, महात्मा गांधी के नेतृत्व में स्वतंत्रता संग्राम का दौर। दूसरा, आजादी के बाद देश को बनाने के लक्ष्य को पाने की चाहतों का दौर और तीसरा, विकसित भारत का आज का दौर। विकसित भारत का यह मिशन समाज के प्रत्येक वर्ग से स्वतंत्रता आंदोलन जैसी प्रतिबद्धता की मांग करने के साथ यह हम सबसे अपने को नए परिवर्तनों से जोड़ने की भी अपेक्षा करता है। विकसित भारत के इस दौर में हमें व्यक्तिगत और संस्थागत, दोनों ही स्तरों पर अपने को पुनर्नवा करने की जरूरत है, तभी प्रधानमंत्री मोदी द्वारा परिकल्पित इस लक्ष्य को पाया जा सकता है।

बीते दिनों राष्ट्रपति द्रौपदी मुर्मु के नेतृत्व में भारतीय शिक्षा एवं शिक्षण संस्थानों के वर्तमान एवं भविष्य पर गहन चिंतन हुआ। उसमें देश भर के विश्वविद्यालयों के कुलपति, आइआईटी, आइआइएम एवं एनआईटी के निदेशक तथा शिक्षा मंत्रालय से जुड़े नीति निर्माता एवं अधिकारियों ने भाग लिया। उसमें शिक्षा मंत्री धर्मेन्द्र प्रधान ने कहा कि उम्मीद है कि हमारे शिक्षण संस्थान भारत में विकास के प्रकाश स्तंभ बनेंगे एवं प्रधानमंत्री द्वारा परिकल्पित विकसित भारत के लिए 'एंकर' का कार्य करेंगे। उनके इस वक्तव्य में भविष्योन्मुखी अपेक्षा निहित है। इसमें यह अपेक्षा है कि भारतीय शिक्षण संस्थान केवल चहारदीवारी के भीतर रहकर पढ़ाने, किताबी ज्ञान देने एवं डिग्री देने वाली संस्था के रूप में ही सीमित न रहें, बल्कि इनसे आगे निकल 'विकास एवं सामाजिक परिवर्तन' के चिंतन केंद्र के रूप में स्वयं को विकसित करें। इस प्रकार ये संस्थाएं अपने शोध, आंकड़ों, विकास समीक्षा एवं चिंतन के माध्यम से विकसित भारत के इस लक्ष्य को हासिल करने के लिए दिशा एवं दृष्टि देंगी। राष्ट्रपति की तरह प्रधानमंत्री भी विकसित भारत के लक्ष्य को पूरा



बंदी नारायण

विकसित भारत के लक्ष्य में शिक्षा की भूमिका इसलिए अहम है, क्योंकि वही प्रगति की आकांक्षा को जन्म देती है



नई पीढ़ी पर भविष्य निर्माण का दायित्व • फाइल

करने में शिक्षा संस्थानों की भूमिका का उल्लेख कर चुके हैं। एक बार साइंस कांग्रेस में उन्होंने देश के शिक्षण संस्थानों से समाज को भी अपनी प्रयोगशाला बनाने का आग्रह किया था। भारतीय शिक्षा एवं शिक्षण संस्थान जब 'भारतीय समाज एवं अपने आसपास हो रहे परिवर्तनों से नाभिनाल का संबंध बना पाएंगे, तभी वे विकसित भारत के प्रकाश स्तंभ की भूमिका निभा पाएंगे।

राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति-2020 इन्हीं उद्देश्यों को पूरा करने वाली है। वह भारतीय शिक्षा के पारंपरिक स्वरूप को तोड़ते हुए एक प्रगतिशील रूपांतर के लिए नीति-नियम रचती है। इस शिक्षा नीति के तहत लचीलापन, अंतर अनुशासनिकता, समाज के विविध प्रयासों के साथ अंतः संवाद तथा समरस एवं विकासोन्मुखी गतिशीलता प्रदान करने की कोशिश दिखाई पड़ती है, ताकि भारतीय शिक्षा में संस्थागत एवं वैयक्तिक स्तर पर आधारभूत परिवर्तन हो सके। भारतीय शिक्षा एवं शिक्षण संस्थानों के समक्ष यह चुनौती भी है कि वे अपनी पारंपरिक प्रकृति, सुविधाभोगी बौद्धिकता एवं अनेक तरह के रूढ़ बंधनों से मुक्त होकर सामाजिक बदलावों, विकास के लिए चल रहे अनगिनत प्रयासों से स्वयं को जोड़ें। आज देश

को ऐसे बुद्धिजीवियों की जरूरत है, जो अपने ज्ञान से समाज में सकारात्मक नेतृत्व को दिशा-दृष्टि दे सकें। महात्मा गांधी ने एक बार कहा था कि ऐसे ही जुड़ाव से हम अपने समाज में निहित पारदर्शी देवत्व को देख और सुन पाएंगे। इस संदर्भ में दूसरी जरूरत है कि समाज एवं शिक्षा के साथ ही राज्य एवं शिक्षा के बीच भी संवाद गहन हो। यह संवाद ऐसा हो, जो दोनों में भेद न पैदा करे, बल्कि दोनों को समृद्ध कर सके। हमारे शिक्षा संस्थान एवं बौद्धिक जगत राज्य द्वारा चलाई जा रही अनेक विकासपरक योजनाओं एवं किए जा रहे कार्यों का सम्यक मूल्यांकन कर उनमें व्याप्त कमियों से उसे अवगत कराए। हमारे यहां योजनाओं के कार्यान्वयन के मूल्यांकन तो होते हैं, पर उन्हें बौद्धिक ज्ञान में बदलने के उपक्रम में हम पीछे रह जाते हैं।

पिछले दिनों शिक्षा मंत्रालय की पहल पर देश के 20 केंद्रीय विश्वविद्यालयों, आइआइएम, आइआईटी इत्यादि ने मिलकर भारत में चल रहे विकास कार्यों के सामाजिक प्रभावों का अध्ययन किया था, जो अब अनेक खंडों में प्रकाशित होकर आ गया है। आज ऐसे ही विविध स्तरों पर अनेक प्रयासों की जरूरत है। बीते दिनों मैं उत्तर प्रदेश के एक राज्य विश्वविद्यालय गया था। वहां के छात्रों ने अनौपचारिक बातचीत में कहा कि विकसित भारत अब हमारे लिए विकास मंत्र है। उस युवा छात्र की यही दृष्टि अगर हमारे शिक्षकों, छात्रों एवं कर्मचारियों में आ जाए तो विकसित भारत के इस लक्ष्य को पाने में हमें सुविधा होगी। भारत की आजादी में जिस भावना से देश के लोग जुटे थे, आज उसी प्रतिबद्ध भाव से विकसित भारत के लक्ष्य से हमें जुड़ना होगा। इस महायज्ञ में शिक्षा संस्थानों, बौद्धिकों, शोधार्थियों एवं छात्रों की महती भूमिका है। शिक्षा की, भूमिका विकसित भारत के संदर्भ में इसलिए भी महत्वपूर्ण है, क्योंकि शिक्षा हममें आगे बढ़ने एवं विकसित होने की आकांक्षा को जन्म देती है। यही आकांक्षा वह उत्प्रेरक शक्ति है, जो भारत के सामान्यजन को विकसित भारत के मिशन से जोड़ सकती है।

(लेखक जीबी पंत सामाजिक विज्ञान संस्थान, प्रयागराज के निदेशक हैं)

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25/3

QS rankings: Some cheer amid concerns

The QS World University Rankings released last week show an improvement in the standing of Indian universities, but also indicate how much more the country's universities have to do to become competitive on the global stage. Nine Indian universities have secured spots in the world's top 50 in the latest QS subject-wise rankings, but some leading institutions have seen a dip in their positions. The rankings show that 79 Indian universities have made it to the list, which is 10 more than last year. Indian universities are well represented in engineering (24 institutes), social sciences (20 institutes) and natural sciences (19 institutes). Indian institutions appeared 533 times in the rankings, reflecting a 25.7% increase.

There are over 1,100 universities and about 45 million students enrolled for higher education in India. The enrollment numbers have been increasing by 1-2 million every year. It is important that good education, if not the best, is provided to all these students and the country has not been able to ensure that. The progress has been slow. Considering the size of the population and the economy, national ambitions and personal aspirations of its students, India's education sector should perform much better across areas – from student enrolment to quality of teaching and learning, from faculty strength and standards to research accomplishments. India has a range of higher education centres such as central universities, state universities, private universities, and specialised centres of education like the IITs and the IIMs. However, very few among them are of global standards.

There are several handicaps that colleges and universities, including the top-ranked ones, are suffering from. A key disadvantage is the absence of qualified faculties and suitable working conditions for the faculty – be it physical infrastructure, teaching and learning infrastructure or competitive remuneration. The bureaucratic culture in most of the universities and the political interference that they frequently witness would not provide ideal working conditions. Universities should be venues for free play of ideas. According to the QS survey, Indian universities could benefit from global collaborations that enable the “country's scholars to access a wider range of academic debates and discoveries.” The government has also invited universities outside the country to set up campuses in India. Delays in improving educational standards in the country would mean denial of the best opportunities to students. 22/8

Indian universities improve standing but need to show more for global endorsement

On the job



SHUTAPA PAUL

Less than half of Indian graduates are actually employable; a worrying trend that exacerbates a difficult job market

12 years ago, I had written a Sunday newspaper feature on how only 10 per cent of all Indian MBA graduates were employable. Cut to 2025, and the numbers seem even more depressing. A recent report has found that only 42.6 per cent of all graduates in India were found to be employable in 2024; a drop from 44.3 per cent in 2023. We are going wrong somewhere if not only has the unemployability factor engulfed other educational fields but has also gotten decidedly worse year-on-year.

Lack of jobs and high inflation continues to singe the Indian population, and to have hordes of unemployable youth further aggravates the job market. The Mercer-Mettl report titled 'India's Graduate Skill Index 2025' further notes that it's the lack of non-technical skills that has dented the job prospects of our graduates especially in roles such as analysts, human resources, and digital marketing where their ability to land jobs has declined from 48.3 per cent in 2023 to 43.5 per cent in 2024. College pass-outs in Delhi perform the best as per the index with 53.4 per cent being job-worthy, followed by Himachal Pradesh and Punjab at 51.1 per cent, Assam at 48.2 per cent, and Telangana at 47.6 per cent. Indian graduates with technical skills have slightly improved



The Indian higher education system needs a reality check to ensure that our youth are made future-ready

their career potential but struggle in roles such as data scientist and back-end developer jobs.

50 per cent of Indian graduates showed proficiency in soft skills required for interfacing with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Gen AI (generative AI), though scope for better creativity still persists. The gender gap between male and female students is perceivable among the current cohort of graduates as well with the employability of male students at 43.4 per cent as against 41.7 per cent for females. And expectedly, Tier 1 colleges outperform with an employability of 48.4 per cent, followed by Tier 2 at 46.1 per cent, and Tier 3 at 43.4 per cent.

The Indian youth are facing a job crisis, wherein, either they don't have requisite skills for a job or are simply, not well-rounded individuals with adequate non-technical, creative and soft skill abilities. The thrust towards AI also means that more youth in the workforce would need to have AI skills. While the Mercer-Mettl report states the improved number of 46 per cent graduates being able to get jobs in AI and Machine Learning (ML), another report by Bain & Company cautions that serious skill gaps in AI are looming large. The global consultancy firm warns that India could face an AI talent shortfall of

over a million workers by 2027, urging the need for large-scale reskilling drives.

The Indian job market is slated to witness chopiness even as fresh graduates continue to find themselves grossly ill-equipped for the real world. Reports suggest that lack of practical training, disruption caused by AI, deficient non-technical training, and stunted hiring in IT (information technology) are leading to challenges within the job market. However, there seems to be a huge lacuna between what the industry wants and what educational institutes seem to be teaching the young adults. This feedback cuts across industries

and a quick chat the recruiting personnel of companies of all sizes will evict the same response.

Now here's what the Indian government has been doing with the Skill India Mission that was launched a decade ago. Its grand plans of training 40 crore youth by 2022 stands at a fraction of 1.4 crore till 2023. Even the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme's (NAPS) target of training 50 lakh apprentices by 2020 reached only 20 lakh by 2022. Of all those that were trained, only a fraction received job placements.

As per the Quacquarelli Symonds' (QS) World Future Skills Index 2025, India comes in second in preparedness for future jobs such as AI and green skills. But we are languishing behind several of our Asia Pacific neighbours coming in at the 25th position on current skills matching the job requirement, and ranking last in the top 30 list for "skills fit" and "future-oriented innovation". The Indian higher education system needs a reality check to ensure that our youth are made future-ready. Else we will keep depending on the gig economy and quick commerce to spit out generations of only drivers and delivery workers.

The writer is an author and media entrepreneur. Views expressed are personal

Only 42.6 per cent of all graduates in India were found to be employable in 2024; a drop from 44.3 per cent in 2023

UNIVERSITY BLUES

With a stroke of its president's pen, the United States of America began to formally dismantle its federal department of education on Thursday night. Even before that executive order, the department had shed half its staff since the inauguration of Donald Trump's presidency two months ago even as the world's richest man, Elon Musk, goes about teaching the US government about being frugal. The order is only the latest in a series of blunt blows that Mr Trump is dealing to American higher education and the values that brought hundreds of thousands of students from all over the world to its universities. An Indian postdoctoral scholar at Georgetown University, Badar Khan Suri, and a Palestinian graduate from Columbia University, Mahmoud Khalil, have both been arrested for their pro-Palestinian views. The state department is trying to deport them even though authorities are yet to spell out what law — if any — the two men have broken, except to exercise the freedom of speech guaranteed under the US Constitution and its famed First Amendment.

The treatment of Mr Suri and Mr Khalil represents the example Mr Trump wants to set for all those whose views he and his allies hold objectionable. Rising anti-Semitism is a real threat. However, instead of addressing that challenge, he has issued a series of executive orders that effectively equate pro-Palestinian sentiment and criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. Soon after taking power, he and his administration had threatened to arrest and deport pro-Palestinian protesters, smearing them with the allegation that they are

pro-Hamas, without offering evidence. They are now acting on that promise. Some, like an Indian PhD scholar, Ranjani Srinivasan, have had their visas cancelled and have chosen to leave the US.

Mr Trump has also begun to act on his threat to cut funding for universities that his administration decides are not doing enough to combat anti-Semitism. His administration has slashed \$400 million in research funding for Columbia University, the epicentre of last year's pro-Palestine protests, and has ordered it to accept

Donald Trump's assault on American higher education will have global consequences

a series of demands, including banning masks at protests and giving the federal government oversight of a department, to get the money. Hearteningly, American courts have stalled plans to deport Mr Suri and Mr Khalil and have barred Columbia from sharing

student records with Mr Trump's administration. The US Congress may stop Mr Trump from dismantling the department of education. But a deep chill has taken root in universities in the US. Freedom has been replaced by fear. Open debate, frank conversations and contestations of ideas — the building blocks of the concept of a university — have long been hallmarks of American campuses, inspiring students and universities around the world. Mr Trump's actions may be replicated elsewhere. After all, universities, public and private ones, in India and other democracies are also facing growing pressure from governments and corporates to tailor themselves to specified world views. If Mr Trump succeeds, American universities will lose much of their allure and the world will lose a legacy upholding freedom of educational thought.

Bhagat Singh's vision vs today's student politics



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HIGHER education institutions have often been the breeding grounds for both legendary and ignoble uprisings worldwide. The current ideological battles in universities such as JNU, DU, Rajasthan University, Central University of Haryana, Hyderabad Central University and Panjab University raise concerns for all stakeholders concerned. Instances of violence, assaults and protest movements — though motivated by various factors — prompt critical questions about the role of politics in these institutions.

Do we need 'politics' in our educational environments? Do these institutions enjoy the necessary independence and reflect the democratic ideals our nation upholds? While student politics is not inherently problematic, the politicisation of student unions in India has led to numerous unintended consequences.

In addition to these issues, higher education in India is plagued by problems reflect-

tive of the broader political landscape. Frequent clashes between student unions, class boycotts, strikes, electoral manipulation, display of muscle power, academic interruptions and violence have become commonplace.

Critics of institutional politicisation provide numerous examples of entire academic sessions being wasted due to such happenings. They deride political violence infiltrating what they refer to as the 'temples' of modern India.

How would Bhagat Singh respond to these developments? Bhagat Singh continues to shape the discourse and activism surrounding student politics across various ideological lines, including those of Gandhi, Ambedkar and Hedgewar. He believed that 'education should create a better, more equal, more democratic and socialist society.'

Ideology often comes with the baggage of indoctrination, and educational institutions often succumb to this allure under the guise of fostering academic orientations. An 18-year-old, fresh from the 'safe' and nurturing confines of a school, is particularly vulnerable to being shaped as a life-long supporter or sympathiser of a particular ideology. For this 'prospective' voter, ideologies compete for attention.

Bhagat Singh urged students to "study so that you are able to meet arguments of your opponents. Equip your ideology with supporting



IMPACTFUL: Bhagat Singh continues to shape the discourse surrounding student politics. TRIBUNE PHOTO

arguments. If you oppose a prevailing belief, if you criticise a great person who is considered to be an incarnation, you will find that your criticism will be answered by calling you vain and egoist. The reason for this is mental ignorance. Logic and free thinking are the twin qualities that a revolutionary must inevitably possess."

In recent years, many of India's largest universities have experienced significant turmoil, becoming stages for political manoeuvres, where student politics serves as a launching pad for broader ambitions. According to Louis Althusser, the State exercises control over its subjects — through both repressive state apparatuses

(like the police) and ideological state apparatuses (such as colleges and universities). Students are often used as instruments by politically affiliated organisations to promote specific ideologies.

In this context, they are provided with 'ready-made' heroes and icons to follow unquestioningly. Bhagat Singh warned against this mentality: To say that Mahatmas, who are great, should not be criticised because they are above criticism and for this reason, whatever they say about politics, religion, economics and ethics is correct and that whatever they say will have to be accepted, whether you believe it or not, reveals a mentality which cannot lead us to progress

and is clearly regressive."

Bhagat Singh was not against student politics; rather, he believed that politics, despite its frequent negative portrayal, is not an inherently bad concept. His conviction was that each student and youth should carry a vibrant vision — an inspiring aspiration for the kind of society they wish to shape and inhabit. While this dream may seem idyllic, it should never veer into the realm of dystopia. Instead, it should be a beacon of hope, illuminating a future filled with possibility and promise.

In his two important essays, "Students and Politics" and "Letter to Young Political Workers", Bhagat Singh expressed that 'students should work to dismantle exploitative structures and build a society based on independence, democracy, and socialism. They should organise themselves and collaborate with peasants and workers... be active in politics and strive for a socialist revolution.'

He imparted a message for students: "Crush your individuality first. Shake off the dreams of personal comfort. Then start to work. Inch by inch you shall have to proceed. It needs courage, perseverance, and very strong determination. No difficulties and no hardships shall discourage you. No failure and betrayal shall dishearten you. No travails imposed upon you shall snuff out the revolutionary will in you. Through the

ordeal of suffering and sacrifice, you shall come out victorious. And these individual victories shall be the valuable assets of the revolution."

Martha Nussbaum, in her writings, cautions that 'it would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others.'

Educators and advocates for education believe strongly that university and college campuses should not become isolated utopias but must reflect and contribute to the broader world beyond their boundaries.

The country needs citizens who are engaged and thoughtful, not submissive individuals or religious fundamentalists. Instead, we should strive to cultivate people who embody Bhagat Singh's philosophy: "The aim of life is no more to control the mind, but to develop it harmoniously, not to achieve salvation hereafter, but to make the best use of it here below, and not to realise truth, beauty and good only in contemplation, but also in the actual experience of daily life; social progress depends not upon the ennoblement of the few but on the enrichment of the many; and spiritual democracy or universal brotherhood can be achieved only when there is an equality of opportunity in the social, political and industrial life." T-2/20

गड़बड़ी पढ़ाने के तरीके में है, बच्चों में नहीं

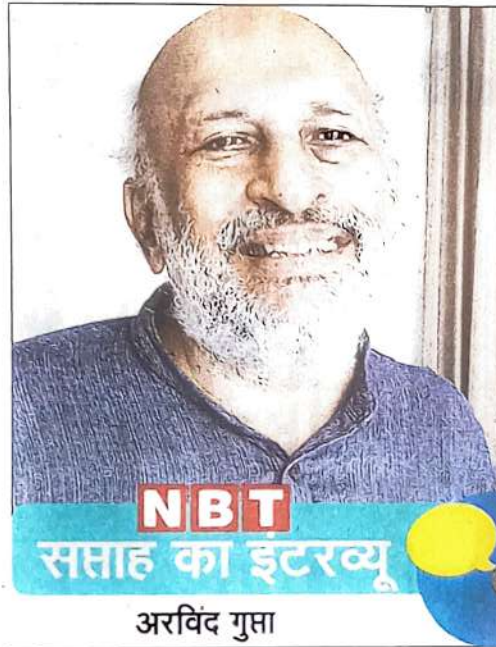
टॉय मैन कहलाने वाले पद्मश्री के खिताब से नवाजे जा चुके अरविंद गुप्ता IIT से प्रशिक्षित इंजिनियर हैं। बच्चों में वैज्ञानिक चेतना जगाना उनकी धुन है और पिछले चालीस सालों से वह इसी के लिए देश भर में घूमते रहे हैं। वह बच्चों को मामूली चीजों से खिलौने बनाने की तरकीब सिखाते हैं। ऐसे खिलौने जो खेल-खेल में तमाम तरह के वैज्ञानिक सिद्धांत समझने का जरिया हैं। पेश हैं प्रभात से हुई उनकी बातचीत के अहम अंश :

■ कानपुर से IIT की पढ़ाई पूरी करने के बाद तो आप नौकरी करने पुणे चले गए थे। फिर विज्ञान की चेतना के प्रसार का यह सिलसिला कैसे और कब शुरू हुआ ?

अस्सी के दशक की बात है। IIT के बाद टेलको (अब टाटा मोटर्स) में नौकरी मिली तो पुणे चला गया। बढ़िया नौकरी थी, काम करने में खूब मजा भी आ रहा था। मगर जाने क्यों मुझे लगता था कि मैं ट्रक बनाने के लिए नहीं बना हूं। तो साल भर की छुट्टी लेकर 'होशंगाबाद साइंस टीचिंग प्रोग्राम' में शामिल होने के लिए मध्य प्रदेश चला गया। यह वैज्ञानिकों, इंजिनियरों, शिक्षाविदों, सामाजिक कार्यकर्ताओं का ऐसा समूह था, जो स्कूलों में साइंस की पढ़ाई के मौलिक तरीके अमल में लाने का इरादा रखता था। वहां एक रोज देहात की हाट में गया। सोचा था कि वहां मिलने वाली सारी चीजें एक-एक नग खरीदूंगा और फिर देखूंगा कि उनके जरिए अपनी बात कहने का कौन-सा तरीका हो सकता है। अपने आसपास की इन चीजों को बच्चे खूब पहचानते हैं। लौटते हुए साइकल में हवा भराने के लिए रुका तो दुकान पर लटकी पतली-काली ट्यूब पर निगाह पड़ी। मैंने वह ट्यूब खरीद ली। उस ट्यूब और माचिस की तीलियों को मिलाकर मैंने मैचस्टिक मॉडल्स बनाए। मैचस्टिक मॉडल का तजुर्बा कामयाब रहा। फिर यह सिलसिला चल पड़ा- पुराने कागज, रद्दी अखबार, माचिस की डिब्बी, जूस के खाली पैकेट, स्ट्रॉ यानी कुछ भी जो कूड़ा है, उससे कुछ न कुछ ऐसा सार्थक बनाया जा सकता है, जो खेलने के साथ ही समझने के भी काम आए। विज्ञान के ऐसे सिद्धांत जो किताबों में गूढ़ लगते हैं, खेल-खेल में आसानी से समझाए जा सकते हैं। हर खिलौना अपनी एक कहानी भी कहता है और फिर यही मकसद बन गया।

■ बच्चों के साथ काम करने का आपका इतना लंबा तजुर्बा है, आपको क्या लगता है कि स्कूल में पढ़ाने और सीखने के बीच गैप कहाँ है ?

मैं जहां गया, वे गांव-देहात के सरकारी स्कूल थे।



जाहिर है कि वहां पढ़ने वाले गरीब घरों के बच्चे ही होते हैं। करीब तीन हजार स्कूलों में जाने का मौका मुझे मिला है। आपको बताऊं कि मैं आज तक जितनी भी जगह गया, मैंने महसूस किया कि मुश्किल वहां के प्रबंधन और पढ़ाने वालों की वजह से है, बच्चों का उसमें कोई दोष नहीं। हालांकि पढ़ाने वाले तो अमूमन यही शिकायत करते हैं कि बच्चे पढ़ना नहीं चाहते। मैंने हर जगह बच्चों की आंखों में सीखने की चमक देखी है। और बच्चों का यह गुण तो सार्वभौम है कि खेलना उन्हें ज्यादा पसंद होता है। वे पढ़ना नहीं चाहते क्योंकि पढ़ाई बहुत उबाऊ और बोझिल है। यानी पढ़ाने का हमारा तरीका ही ऐसा है तो खेल-खिलौनों के जरिए उन्हें समझना-सिखाना कहीं ज्यादा आसान है।

■ मैंने पढ़ा कि आपकी किताब 'मैचस्टिक मॉडल्स' का आधा दर्जन से ज्यादा जबानों में तर्जुमा हुआ है और अब तक पांच लाख से ज्यादा प्रतियां बिक चुकी हैं...

उसके बाद कई किताबें लिखी हैं, जो खेल और कहानी के जरिए सरल जबान में बच्चों में विज्ञान के संस्कार विकसित करने में मदद कर सकती हैं। अपनी सारी किताबों को स्कैन करके अपनी वेबसाइट और आर्काइव डॉट ओआरजी पर भी अपलोड कर दिया है ताकि दुनिया भर के जरूरतमंद मुफ्त में उन्हें पढ़ सकें। मेरी हर किताब के आठ-दस भाषाओं में अनुवाद हैं। फिर मुझे लगा कि अपने यहां बच्चों के लिए पब्लिक लाइब्रेरी तो है नहीं, और उनको दूसरी किताबें भी पढ़ने

मुझे करीब तीन हजार स्कूलों में जाने का मौका मिला। मैंने महसूस किया

कि मुश्किल वहां के प्रबंधन और पढ़ाने वालों की वजह से है। मैंने हर जगह बच्चों की आंखों में सीखने की चमक देखी है। बच्चों को खेलना ज्यादा पसंद होता है, वे पढ़ना नहीं चाहते क्योंकि तरीका बहुत उबाऊ और बोझिल है

के लिए मिलनी चाहिए तो मैंने किताबों के अनुवाद शुरू किए। प्रेरक कहानियों की छोटी-छोटी किताबें। हर रोज एक किताब का अनुवाद करके अपलोड कर देता हूं। अब तक हिंदी और अंग्रेजी में अनुवाद करके सोलह हजार से ज्यादा किताबें अपलोड कर चुका हूं।

■ कोई एक ऐसा तत्व जो आपको लगता है कि बच्चों को पढ़ने या सीखने के लिए सबसे ज्यादा आकर्षित करता है ?

मुझे लगता है कि सरलता ही ऐसा तत्व है। बरेली के कवि निरंकार देव सेवक की बच्चों के लिए लिखी कविताएं याद कीजिए, आपको अंदाजा हो जाएगा कि बच्चों को बताना और याद कराना कितना आसान भी होता है। दूसरी बात यह कि फिजूल का अनुशासन बच्चों को रास नहीं आता। मेरी मां बेहतर पढ़ाई की हामी जरूर थीं, मगर इससे ज्यादा और कुछ नहीं। हम बच्चे स्कूल से आकर घूम रहे हैं, गली में खेल रहे हैं, मस्ती कर रहे हैं। उन्हें हमेशा इसी में संतोष मिलता कि बच्चे खुश हैं। उन्होंने न तो कभी खेलने पर टोका और न ही पढ़ने पर कोई जोर दिया। उन्होंने हमसे खुश रहने के अलावा कभी कोई उम्मीद नहीं की। मतलब यही कि दबाव बच्चों पर बहुत असरदार नहीं होता।

■ अपनी प्रतिबद्धता के इतने लंबे सफर का हासिल आप क्या मानते हैं ? और समाज में वैज्ञानिक चेतना के माहौल में कैसा बदलाव पाते हैं ?

हमारा काम समुद्र में बूंद के बराबर है। इसके उलट अवैज्ञानिकता के प्रसार में जुटे लोग कहीं ज्यादा साधन संपन्न हैं। कोशिश हमने फिर भी नहीं छोड़ी है, लगातार काम कर ही रहे हैं और इस उम्मीद में कि हम और हमारी बात जहां तक पहुंच सके, साइंस की रोशनी वहां पहुंचती रहे। हाथ पर हाथ धरे बैठे रहने से भी तो कुछ नहीं बदलने वाला, इसीलिए हमेशा कुछ न कुछ करते रहना चाहिए।

"HEGEMONIC"

HINDI HEATS UP LANGUAGE ROW

While the Centre promotes multilingualism through its 3-language formula, Tamil Nadu resists maintaining that it is an unfair pressure on non-Hindi states, escalating tension between the two

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Tamil Nadu's resistance to Hindi imposition dates back to 1937, when the Congress government in Madras Presidency, led by C Rajagopalachari, introduced compulsory Hindi in schools. The move sparked outrage among Tamils, who saw it as an erosion of their Dravidian heritage. And over the years, Hindi was framed as a symbol of North Indian domination over the South.

The three-language formula under NEP, which recommends students learn another language alongside their regional language and English, is seen by the DMK as a covert attempt to introduce Hindi through the back door.

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has strongly refuted these claims, maintaining that NEP 2020 allows linguistic freedom and does not impose Hindi. In a letter to Stalin, Pradhan stated:

"There is no question of imposing any language on any state or community. NEP 2020 upholds the principle of linguistic freedom and ensures that students continue to learn in the language of their choice." He argued that NEP's multilingual approach would broaden educational access rather than restrict it.

Despite these reassurances, political leaders in Tamil Nadu remain staunch in their opposition. Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin reiterated: "Tamil Nadu has always been against the three-language policy. We will never accept that. The Centre wants to use NEP as a backdoor entry for Hindi."

The three-language formula was first proposed by the Education Commission (1964-66), officially known as the Kothari Commission. It was formally adopted in the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968 under then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The policy was reaffirmed in NPE 1986 under PM Rajiv Gandhi and revised in 1992 by Narasimha Rao's Congress government to promote linguistic diversity and national unity.

The commission, chaired by physicist Dr Daulat Singh Kothari, recommended that students learn their mother tongue or regional language, the official language of the Union, a modern Indian or European language, apart from the first two.

According to NPE 1968, Hindi-speaking states should teach a modern Indian language, preferably a southern language, alongside Hindi and English. Non-Hindi-speaking states were to include Hindi, their regional language, and English. The policy was reinforced in NPE 1986 and its 1992 revision, with the aim of achieving a national consensus on Hindi as a link language.

However, the 1992 policy also admitted that "the implementation of this part (three-language) of the 1968 Policy has, however, been uneven. The policy will be implemented more energetically and purposefully."

The Centre maintains that the new policy allows more flexibility without enforcing any language. NEP 2020 states: "The three-language formula will continue to be implemented while keeping in mind the constitutional provisions, the need to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity. However, there will be greater flexibility, and no language will be imposed on any state."

NEP 2020 further clarifies 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 ensures



Tamil Nadu fears that once NEP is adopted, the Centre will dictate implementation in a way that erodes state autonomy and imposes Hindi

that while the policy promotes linguistic diversity, states retain autonomy in their language preferences.

Tamil Nadu's refusal to implement key aspects of NEP 2020, particularly the three-language formula, has resulted in the Centre withholding Rs 573 crore in central education assistance under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). According to policy rules, states must comply with NEP guidelines to receive SSA funding, of which 60 per cent is provided by the Centre in states like Tamil Nadu.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, launched in 2018, has been strengthened under NEP 2020 to focus on experiential learning and foundational literacy. The SSA funding structure varies from general states and Union Territories (UTs) with legislatures receiving 60 per cent central funding, northeast and Himalayan states getting 90 per cent central funding and last but not the least, UTs without legislatures receiving full funding (100 per cent) from the Centre.

Education is a part of the Constitution's "Concurrent" list, which means that both the federal and state governments can make and enact laws around it. Schools and colleges follow different syllabi and rules depending on who oversees them — the federal or state governments.

India, where states are mostly organized on linguistic lines, has nearly two dozen official languages, including Hindi, Tamil and English. But southern states have often protested against efforts by successive federal governments to privilege Hindi over other languages.

“There is no question of imposing any language on any state or community. NEP 2020 upholds the principle of linguistic freedom and ensures that students continue to learn in the language of their choice”

— Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Education Minister



“Tamil Nadu has always been against the three-language policy. We will never accept that. The Centre wants to use NEP as a backdoor entry for Hindi”

— Udhayanidhi Stalin, Deputy Chief Minister, Tamil Nadu



There are 22 official languages, with Hindi — spoken by more than 46 per cent of the population — being the most widely used

It is an especially sensitive issue in Tamil Nadu, which has historically been at the forefront of such protests. Stalin and his party — who say they are not against Hindi itself — have argued over the past few weeks that the policy's eventual aim is to force the language on non-Hindi-speaking states.

The chief minister wrote on X last month that Hindi — which emerged as a standardised language for easy communication during the British era — ended up dominating other languages and dialects spoken in northern India, such as Bhojpuri and Awadhi.

His party's MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi also recently questioned why a student should be forced to learn three languages.

"Students have enough burdens in schools. You have to learn

so many subjects, and on top of that you are forced to learn three languages instead of two," she has been quoted as saying according to media reports. But Pradhan has denied allegations that the policy will force Hindi through.

India is one of the world's most linguistically diverse countries and some estimates say thousands of languages are spoken here.

But there are only 22 official languages, with Hindi — spoken by more than 46 per cent of the population — being the most widely used, according to the last census held in 2011.

After the British left India in 1947, the newly independent nation sought to promote Hindi as a link language to replace English. The Constitution — enacted in 1950 — also nudges the federal government to promote the spread of Hindi.

This invited fierce opposition from non-Hindi-speaking states, prompting the federal government to continue using English as an alternate official language for 15 years after 1950.

As the deadline year of 1965

approached, violent protests erupted again across Tamil Nadu, leading the federal government to pass a law that assured the continued use of English as an official language.

However, successive federal governments have introduced policies or made announcements that have kept these anxieties simmering.

The 1968 NEP adopted the three-language formula for the first time and, in the same year, the government introduced policies mandating the teaching of Hindi in non-Hindi speaking states, leading to fresh protests.

Over the years, the issue of Hindi versus other languages has made headlines repeatedly. In 2023, Stalin criticised the Modi government for replacing some colonial-era laws with ones bearing Hindi names (the Indian Penal Code, for instance, has been replaced with a law named *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*).

A federal government commission that examined the language policy during 1948-49 acknowledged that the issue's

sentimental nature made it "difficult to consider it in a calm and detached manner".

"No other problem has caused greater controversy among educationists and evoked more contradictory views from our witnesses," it maintained.

Tamil Nadu has been at the forefront of the fight against Hindi imposition since India's independence. The Dravidian movement, which shaped Tamil Nadu's political identity, has always viewed the promotion of Hindi as a form of North Indian linguistic and cultural dominance. The most significant of these protests took place in 1965, when a proposed policy to replace English with Hindi as India's sole official language led to violent agitations in Tamil Nadu. As a result, the Indian government passed a law assuring that English would continue as an official language alongside Hindi.

In response to these concerns, Tamil Nadu adopted a two-language formula, where schools only teach Tamil and English, rejecting the three-language policy that mandated Hindi in other non-Hindi-speaking states. This has remained a defining feature of Tamil Nadu's Dravidian governance, with the DMK and AIADMK governments fiercely protecting it.

Tamil Nadu's opposition to NEP 2020 goes beyond language. The state also rejects several structural changes in the policy, which it believes will harm students from disadvantaged backgrounds and reinforce caste-based discrimination.

"It denies financial aid to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. It introduces national-level entrance exams even for arts and science colleges. It aims to push students out of the education system by implementing exit options from Class 10. It enforces state-based vocational education from Class 6. That is why we are firmly stating that we won't accept it," said Stalin.

Views expressed are personal

The state has already fought a long battle against the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medical admissions, arguing that it disproportionately affects Dalit, OBC, and rural students.

Stalin has called NEP 2020 "anti-poor, anti-reservation, and anti-social justice," accusing the BJP of trying to dismantle Tamil Nadu's progressive policies that have ensured equitable access to education.

The policy's emphasis on standardised testing at multiple school levels, including grades 3, 5 and 8, is another contentious issue, with the state fearing that it could exacerbate educational inequality and increase dropout rates, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, the push for vocational training from class 6 has been criticised for potentially diverting students from higher education paths, restricting career mobility and reinforcing socio-economic stratification.

The Tamil Nadu government maintains that its existing education model, which has produced high literacy rates and successful professionals across industries, does not require a structural overhaul dictated by the Centre. The resistance, therefore, is not just about financial incentives but about preserving the autonomy of a system that Tamil Nadu believes has already proven its effectiveness on a national and global scale.

The real issue lies in execution and political trust. Tamil Nadu fears that once NEP is adopted, the Centre will dictate implementation in a way that erodes state autonomy. The BJP, on the other hand, sees Tamil Nadu's resistance as politically motivated, aimed at keeping the DMK's anti-Hindi, pro-state autonomy narrative alive. With neither side willing to back down, the chances of a negotiated compromise look bleak and the impasse is likely to continue, leading to students getting caught in the crossfire.

Views expressed are personal

malya

Crisis on campus

The shift from intellectual debate to physical aggression raises a crucial question — have we abandoned the core values of discourse and dissent, replacing them with coercion and intimidation? This fundamental departure from rational activism raises an uncomfortable question: Have we failed as educators, mentors, and as a society in imparting the right values to our students?

As an alumnus of Jadavpur University and currently an Assistant Professor at Bidhan Chandra College, Asansol, I find myself increasingly disturbed by the recent turmoil on campus. Once a symbol of intellectual rigor and progressive student activism, Jadavpur University now finds itself in the headlines for all the wrong reasons. What should have been a forum for constructive discourse — the convention of WEBCUPA attended by educators across West Bengal and the Honorable Education Minister, Bratya Basu — descended into violence, chaos, and outright anarchy. Professors were assaulted, vehicles vandalized, and even the state minister was injured.

The scene was harrowing — professors who had traveled from various institutions, including many from Paschim Bardhaman, Purba Bardhaman and many other districts found their vehicles targeted, with windshields shattered and their personal safety at risk. For years, they had heard of the increasing radicalization on campus, but to witness it firsthand, to be subjected to the very hostility they had read about, was a rude awakening. What impression does this leave on the academic community? What message does it send to those who once held Jadavpur in the highest regard?

The situation has since escalated, with students threatening an indefinite shutdown if their demands, including the withdrawal of legal cases, are not met by the administration. But amidst the battle cries, have we paused to reflect on the deeper crisis unfolding? Jadavpur University, once an institution of Eminence, has lost that status, and no one seems to be asking why.

A university's reputation is built on rigorous scholarship, a culture of debate, and an unwavering commitment to academic freedom. However, when these principles are compromised by recurring instability and a shift away from intellectual pursuits towards aggressive activism, it is inevitable that such a prestigious status would be revoked. This should serve as a wake-up call, urging us to reflect on whether we are prioritizing institutional integrity or allowing it to be eroded by external influences and internal discord. Are we witnessing the death of academic excellence at the altar of aggressive and often politically-driven protests?

Jadavpur University has a storied legacy of student activism. Like many of my peers, I, too, engaged in protests, debates, and ideological struggles during my time there. But our activism was rooted in intellectual rigor and the power of argument — not in intimidation, violence, or disruption of public life. Today's campus movements, however, seem to operate on a dangerous new principle: If you cannot out-argue your opponent, silence them with force. A striking example of this was the recent violence at Jadavpur University, where educators, including professors from vari-



ous districts, were subjected to hostility, their vehicles vandalized, and their personal safety threatened. The shift from intellectual debate to physical aggression raises a crucial question — have we abandoned the core values of discourse and dissent, replacing them with coercion and intimidation? This fundamental departure from rational activism raises an uncomfortable question: Have we failed as educators, mentors, and as a society in imparting the right values to our students?

Universities are meant to be sanctuaries of free thought, critical inquiry, and mutual respect. When protests turn into physical altercations, vandalism, and violent confrontations with faculty members, the movement loses its moral ground. A glaring contrast can be drawn between historic protests such as the Anti-Emergency Movement of the 1970s — where students used literature, theatre, and peaceful resistance to challenge authority — and the recent unrest at Jadavpur University, where physical aggression and destruction of public property have overshadowed any meaningful dialogue.

One of the biggest transformations in recent years has been the way ideological differences manifest on campus. During our time, students and teachers held differing opinions, but we engaged in dialogue, we questioned, we debated — we never resorted to physical attacks. Has our society now created an environment where ideological divergence is seen as an unbridgeable chasm, rather than a foundation for debate?

Social media has exacerbated this divide, as evidenced by its influence on student activism at Jadavpur University. Movements that once relied on grassroots organizing and in-person deliberation are now driven by viral trends and online outrage. In recent incidents, social media has amplified ideological divisions, allowing misinformation

to spread rapidly and fueling reactionary responses. This shift has transformed protests into spectacles, where visibility often takes precedence over substantive dialogue.

While social media has empowered student voices, it has also contributed to a culture of immediate backlash rather than sustained intellectual engagement. Platforms that could be used for intellectual exchange and mobilization of constructive activism have, instead, become echo chambers of misinformation, outrage, and hostility. Protests are no longer about rational discourse but about who can garner more online attention. A movement's success is measured by trends and retweets rather than real engagement and solutions. This shift has amplified polarization, making it harder for any genuine dialogue to take place.

While student protests claim to fight for justice, it is undeniable that many who are not part of the movement suffer the most. Hundreds of students, eager to complete their education, now find their academic lives disrupted. In the name of student rights, are we infringing on the rights of those who simply want to study and build their future? Should student activism come at the cost of another student's right to learn?

Another alarming trend in these protests is their tendency to spill beyond the university gates, blocking roads, disrupting public life, and inconveniencing thousands of ordinary citizens who have no role in university politics. The right to protest is fundamental in a democracy, but should it come at the cost of a citizen's right to commute freely, reach work on time, or transport patients to hospitals without obstruction? The best protests resonate through their message, not through the level of disruption they cause.

For instance, consider the Chipko Movement, where vil-

lagers peacefully hugged trees to prevent deforestation — without harming a single individual. Their activism was powerful because it appealed to the conscience of the people and policymakers alike. Today's violent campus protests, on the other hand, alienate the very public whose support they seek.

One of the most alarming aspects of recent events is the shift in student-teacher dynamics. Professors, who should be mentors and guides, are now viewed as adversaries. The physical assault on faculty members is not just an attack on individuals but a blow to the very foundation of academic discourse. How did we reach a point where students resort to violence against those who are dedicated to their intellectual growth?

This erosion of respect is not merely a university issue; it reflects a larger societal problem. Has political polarization poisoned student activism to the extent that it is no longer about reform but about domination? Have external forces hijacked student movements, turning them into pawns in a larger ideological battle? If universities become breeding grounds for political agendas rather than centers of free thought, we risk losing their true purpose.

The ongoing turmoil at Jadavpur University is symptomatic of a deeper crisis — one rooted in political interference in university affairs, whether through student groups or administrative appointments. It has disrupted the academic culture and decision-making processes. Administrative inefficiencies in governance, failure to uphold academic integrity, and inability to handle campus disputes effectively have contributed to instability. The shift from intellectual debate to aggression, including the recent acts of violence against educators and visiting dignitaries, highlights a dangerous trend where dissent is met with hostility rather than dialogue (growing culture of intolerance). It requires urgent intervention.

As an alumnus, my concerns about Jadavpur University's trajectory are deeply personal. The institution I once revered for its academic excellence and spirit of fearless inquiry is now at a crossroads. The question before us is urgent: Will Jadavpur University reclaim its place as a beacon of knowledge and constructive dissent, or will it continue down a path of unrest that erodes its very foundation?

Universities should be spaces of enlightenment, not battlegrounds of violence. The onus is on all of us — students, educators, parents, and policymakers — to restore dignity to debate and discipline to discourse. If we fail, we risk not only the future of Jadavpur University but also the broader future of academic and democratic traditions in this country.

The time to act is now. Let us ensure that our universities remain temples of learning, not arenas of perpetual strife. Only then can we truly say that we have imparted the right values to the next generation.



AMRITA BANERJEE

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MIND'S MISSIVES

A letter can mean the difference between life and death as readers of *Romeo and Juliet* would know. But it can also be a way of pouring one's heart out on paper when it is difficult to express oneself out loud, as Jane Austen has repeatedly demonstrated in her novels. It is this cathartic aspect of letter-writing that is at the core of a novel initiative started by the Fanindra Deb Institution in Jalpaiguri. The school has set up a letterbox — Mon Peon-er Bag — for young students to unburden themselves. Children have, since then, dropped into it several missives that reveal the troubles weighing them down. Some are distressed because they do not have enough time for sports in school; others complain that their fathers do not spend enough time at home; others still are worried about quarrelling parents vitiating the atmosphere at home. The school intends to take up these issues for discussion with children and their guardians.

This new way to a child's mind in a bid to tackle mental health issues is a heartening step. UNICEF data show that one in every seven young people in India is depressed. The strategy has also unveiled the now-forgotten benefits letter-writing has for mental health. There exist studies — they go back to 1986 — to show that writing letters can be a way of unwinding *sans* fear of judgement. Research from Princeton University even revealed that letter-writing is a simplified, more flexible, approach to psychotherapy, transforming the chaotic, non-linear, inner monologues of a disturbed mind into a conversation, thereby enabling people to consider the nuances, logic and depth of their

A school in Jalpaiguri has introduced students to the therapeutic benefits of letter-writing to address children's mental health issues

thoughts and emotions. What is of significance is that handwritten letters score slightly higher than electronic ones: putting pen to paper and forming the words require a mindfulness that clattering away on the keyboard does not. Little wonder then that pen pals were once all the rage. People, young and old, did not mind writing long letters to others halfway across the globe. The International Bipolar Foundation has even found that having a pen pal can actually reduce loneliness. The Fanindra Deb Institution has thus struck upon the right idea. Is there a case of expanding the scope of such an initiative, with various schools brought under the umbrella of a shared programme? This could give

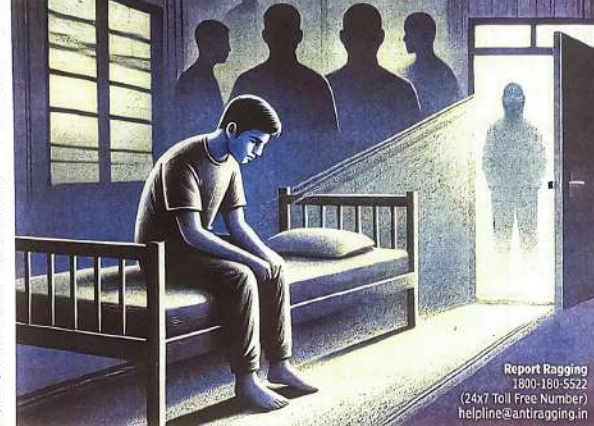
a larger number of students the opportunity to share their troubles unhindered.

But the Mon Peon-er Bag cannot be the solution to India's burgeoning juvenile mental health issues. India must think of making greater investments in boosting the number of counsellors and psychiatrists for school

children. In the absence of school counsellors, teachers will have to take up this additional responsibility. In fact, a 2024 survey by the National Institutes of Health showed that the paucity of counsellors in schools had led to an increased workload of teachers. Untrained teachers ill-equipped to help students can cause more harm than good. Furthermore, in a nation with a weak culture of privacy, students who express their vulnerabilities can be bullied if their letters were to fall into the wrong hands. These concerns notwithstanding, the Mon Peon is not to be dismissed in a country that pays little attention to children's mental health. 10

Kerala to Haryana and Gujarat to Bengal, the last six months have thrown up campus shockers at alarming frequency, exposing limitations in the strategy to end the oppressive treatment freshers face at the hands of seniors

HOW RAGGING KEEPS RAISING ITS UGLY HEAD



Report Ragging
1800-180-5522
(24x7 Toll Free Number)
helpline@antraging.in

Slabbing someone with a divider is a criminal act anywhere. But when it happens in a hostel, it attains another dimension of malicious. It's even more horrifying when the perpetrators are youngsters training to be nurses, in whose hands is supposed to rest the well-being of patients.

Ragging is a beast we simply can't seem to tame. Like at the Govt Nursing College in Kerala's Kottayam this Feb — where the brutalities included tying first-years to cots and hanging dumbbells from their genitals — it rears its ugly head time and again, despite stringent crackdowns, episodes of national outrage, and interventions by Supreme Court. In the same month, in a different part of the country, two students at Jindal Global University in Haryana filed ragging complaints. One of them, a BA (criminology) student, alleged he was hit on the head with a steel bottle and lashed with a belt by a senior.

In Nov last year, Anil Methaniya, a student at GMERS Medical College at Dharpur-Patan collapsed after he was made to stand for hours as part of a ragging ritual and sustained head injuries. He later died in hospital. Two months before that, at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, a 17-year-old Bengali (Hons) student fell to his death from the second floor of the main hostel. He had allegedly been humiliated by seniors who had also made him cut his hair.

"We were told by our seniors to engage in humiliating acts like stripping down and performing sexual acts against a wall," said an MBBS student from a college in Rajasthan, describing the torment his batch of first years went through at the hostel in their first few months.

SC Stepped In 24 Years Ago

The apex court defines ragging as "any disorderly conduct whether by words spoken or written or by an act which has the effect of teasing, treating or handling with rudeness any other student, indulging in rowdy or undisciplined activities which causes or is likely to cause annoyance, hardship or psychological harm or to raise fear or apprehension thereof in a fresher or a junior..."

Although the definition came in 2001 — when the court was hearing a petition by the non-profit Vishwa Jagriti Mission on increasing ragging cases in colleges — it was only in 2009 that a seven-member committee, led by former CBI chief RK Raghavan, was appointed to suggest anti-ragging measures that campuses could uniformly adopt. The Centre acted after widespread anger that followed the death of medical student Aman Kachroo during a ragging incident at his college in Himachal Pradesh. Kachroo, then 19, succumbed to injuries after being beaten up by four seniors, triggering protests across the country and a demand for laws that sternly deal with ragging.

Sixteen years on, there's a different generation in college. Students now are more aware of campus codes and their rights, but the baton of bullying has also been passed on. What was true in Kachroo's time is true still: medical colleges (there are around 700 of them as against more than 6,000 engineering and tech colleges in India) remain fertile sites for the worst forms of bullying.

3% Of Hostellers, 38% Of Ragging Cases

Data from the anti-ragging helpline of the University Grants Commission (UGC) shows that since 2017, with the exception of the two pandemic years when campuses were largely shut, the number of complaints has averaged around 1,000 a year. This includes 51 complaints of deaths of students, of which 47 were by suicide.

UGC chairperson M Jagadeesh Kumar said the numbers partly reflect improved awareness. "The rise in complaints indicates greater awareness, trust, and willingness among students to report incidents," he pointed out, adding that UGC has strengthened its mechanisms to make more students aware of the helpline. However, anti-ragging activists say the UGC data doesn't capture all incidents as the helpline does not register anonymous complaints. So, not all incidents of severe ragging that get reported in the media are captured on the helpline since students hesitate to reveal their identity for fear of being targeted.

Data from Society Against Violence in Education (SAVE), an anti-ragging NGO, shows that medical colleges accounted for 38.6% of all ragging complaints during 2022-24 despite making up only 3.4% of total hostel students. "A total of 3,156 complaints were registered from 1,946 colleges. It is not correct to say that the whole of India registered just these

many complaints in three years. These are merely the ones logged by the national anti-ragging helpline," the SAVE report said. The NGO's research suggests that a sizable number of cases, especially the serious ones, went directly to college management or to police instead of the helpline.

Insults, Threats, Slaps, Orders

The Rajasthan MBBS student said the college environment was unbearable in the first few weeks after he took admission last year. "We were made to strip, inflate condoms with our mouths, engage in mock sexual acts with walls, floors, batchmates." He said he tried to lodge multiple anonymous complaints on UGC's anti-ragging helpline.

The college administration's response made him feel vulnerable, he said. "The principal and vice-principal were angry with me and said they would complain to cyber police about anonymous griev-

ances. They told the entire batch that whoever was filing such complaints was ruining the college's reputation and that if anyone had a real problem, they should approach them directly."

Numbers may be smaller, but ragging on engineering campuses can get vicious, too. A third-year engineering student at a UP college was so traumatised that he transferred out after his first semester. "My seniors slapped me hard across the face whenever they saw me in hostel. Once, I was slapped so badly that I temporarily lost hearing in one ear. I was too scared to complain because I feared things would get worse if it was found out. After the first semester, I changed my college," he recalled.

A medical college student in Tripura said him and his batchmates were subjected to online abuse that continued day and night, leaving them afraid to use their phone or attend classes. "We were all added to a WhatsApp group and told to perform certain tasks by our seniors. If we failed to respond, they threatened us with dire consequences," the student noted. In another case, a master's student at a social science college in Telangana was harassed online for her caste. Her classmates posted sexist slurs on a common WhatsApp group. She skipped classes for days, humiliated.

Laws In Force Since 90s

It's been a quarter of a century since Supreme Court defined what constitutes ragging but the evil continues unabated, pointing to obvious shortcomings in efforts to combat it. In fact, several state laws pre-date the court's 2001 judgment. Tripura brought in an anti-ragging law in 1990 that prescribes a maximum punishment of four years. In 1997, Tamil Nadu became the first Indian state to put a complete ban on ragging in educational institutions through an ordinance criminalising it that was later converted into the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Ragging Act, 1997.

The law was enacted after a horrifying case of ragging that led to the murder of first-year MBBS student Ron Navarua in his hostel room by his senior John David. Navarua's body was chopped into pieces and disposed of in different parts of the state. A police investigation later revealed that Navarua was assaulted by David for refusing to strip down and lick shoes.

Between 1997 and 2000, states like Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra and West Bengal passed their own anti-ragging laws that provide for fines, expulsion and imprisonment in serious cases. Tamil Nadu can claim to be among the better performers on enforcing the law. "The zero-tolerance policy changes in perception, and students' resistance broke the chain of ragging in professional colleges," said N Rajendran, former vice-chancellor of Alagappa University Private institutions and deemed universities, too, have played a role, immediately expelling students involved in ragging.

Is A Central Law The Answer?

A counsellor at Delhi University told TOI about how ragging has transformed over the years. "Seniors no longer simply demand tasks from juniors

in the old-fashioned way. Now, it tends to manifest itself as bullying and discrimination. Caste-based, caste-based, and even anti-LGBTQ. Many do not register it as ragging as it does not fit the conventional definition," she said.

Supreme Court lawyer Meera Kaura Patel — who has handled several ragging cases — said India needs a central anti-ragging law that is uniformly implemented by states. The problem, she said, is the lack of a standard approach to ragging with police invoking sections under penal laws based on the nature of the complaint. "There are states that do not have anti-ragging laws while the others that do have laws may not impose adequate punishment," she said. Typically, in state laws, an offence of ragging is punishable by a fine and 2-4 years of imprisonment.

Patel explained that sections under BNS — like causing wrongful or grievous hurt, abetment and even outraging of modesty, depending on the incident — can be invoked in ragging cases. "Ragging itself is not an offence under BNS. Right now, it's up to different states to decide what constitutes ragging and what punishment should be handed down for it. There is no uniformity." She said ragging needs to be categorised as a cognisable offence across all states regardless of the nature of ragging. "You cannot say that this much is acceptable and this much is not," Patel said.

Former Congress Lok Sabha MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury had introduced "The Prohibition and Eradication of Ragging Bill 2019 in Parliament that called for uniform laws against ragging in all colleges and universities. It has, however, not been passed.



Ragging itself is not an offence under BNS. Right

now, it's up to different states to decide what constitutes ragging and what punishment should be handed down for it. There is no uniformity

— MEERA KAURA PATEL
SUPREME COURT LAWYER

Guarantee Needed Against Retaliation

Prof Dheeraj Sanghi, vice-chancellor at JK Lakshmipat University in Jaipur who has previously worked at IIT Kanpur and IIT Delhi, said what first-year students need is the right environment to report cases without fear of reprisal. "They are scared they'll end up in the bad books of the very people they must spend years with," he said.

Gaurav Singhal, vice-president of SAVE, said proper enforcement of anti-ragging regulations has to begin at colleges. "UGC's rule states that freshers should be placed in separate hostels. But many colleges do not fulfil this requirement. Another rule requires that an FIR be filed as soon as a complaint is received by the college. But only a few comply. We filed an RTI five years ago and discovered that only 5% of institutions follow this guideline," he said. "Colleges avoid registering ragging complaints to protect their reputations. Some have even asked students to sign written declarations that they were never ragged," he added.

Raj Kachroo, who started the anti-ragging NGO Aman Movement, named after his brother, told TOI that after Covid, the National Ragging Prevention Programme, of which the helpline is a part, stopped working effectively. "Before Covid, people from the helpline would make regular calls to colleges to check compliance and keep in touch with students' parents. All that does not happen anymore," said Kachroo.

Singhal said no anti-ragging law will work properly without an effective reporting mechanism with each victim and perpetrator have to live in unsure about for three-four years. "So a victim withdraws the complaint under pressure. The best bet for seniors' parents available to juniors. Put deal with the fear of family would be the best way to

2023/03/22



Today, the performance of faculty members in most academic institutes, especially in Engineering, is being judged by their research output. However, this begs certain pressing questions. Why is so much thrust being put on the 'research' component for career advancement when a large number of institutions do not have a sound research infrastructure, unlike some premier government-funded tech institutes? Why is it not sufficient if faculty focus on imparting skills to students through innovative teaching and lab-related work, along with additional responsibilities such as mentoring and career guidance? Of course, with rapid developments and changes in technology, faculty members have to upgrade their knowledge to help students learn and evolve.

As of now, there are not too many effective guidelines to assess a researcher's true potential. A key yardstick of assessment is the citation index. Many institutes have been rewarding faculty researchers based on their citation index, which translates to having a good citation score in indexing sites such as *Google Scholar*, *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *Research Gate*, and others. This system is a catalyst to some faculty researchers producing quantitative research and even being mentioned as the top 1% or

Need for quality checks

What is required is a metric to evaluate constructive research contribution, rather than going by the citation index



on social media, which are higher than the citation count of few internationally-acclaimed Indian researchers. It would be a stretch of imagination to conclude that such researchers are superior than the internationally-acclaimed ones. One can always come up with a counter-argument as to why not?

The objective is not to belittle researchers having an impressive citation count. As outlined earlier, high citation count can arise out of not-so-great research. It can also increase when researchers form a group and keep referencing each other within the group, often with little reason. Many universities/institutes have started rewarding researchers based on the number of index papers and citation counts in the absence of a more comprehensive measure for qualitative research.

Unless we develop a good enough metric to evaluate constructive research contribution, it will be difficult to bring ethical practices in academic publications in most institutions. There is a need for the people at the helm of policy-making committees in these institutions to ponder over and stem the flow of a large number of publications with insignificant contributions, written merely to increase the count number.

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2% researchers in a list by a top-ranking world institute.

Limitations

Evaluating research contributions through citations can be erroneous. Assume

that a researcher makes a crazy claim and writes a number of bad research papers. It is obvious that an avalanche of criticism from expert researchers in the area will follow. This will enable the researcher to

become one of the most cited researchers with a good citation index. The moot question is: how do we evaluate what is 'good' and what is a 'less acceptable' research. There are additional issues of ghost

writing of research papers and the problem of predatory journals.

There have been instances of researchers routinely flaunting their Google citation count and h-indexes of their research

The financial crisis reshaping British higher education: why, likely impact

RITIKA CHOPRA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 23

BRITISH UNIVERSITIES are facing a mounting financial crisis. The Office for Students warns that nearly three in four British universities could be in deficit by 2025. One in four leading institutions are already cutting staff and budgets.

This is in large part driven by a significant decline in the enrolment of international students, especially from developing countries.

For instance, UK Home Office data show that the number of Indian students in the country recently fell by 20.4%, from 139,914 in 2022-23 to 111,329 in 2023-24. Indians are the second-largest student community in the UK.

Reliance on foreign students

The UK government sets tuition fees for domestic students. Raising them has proven

to be politically unpopular. Fees remained frozen at 9,250 pounds for nearly a decade, before a modest 250-pound increase was approved recently.

Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, Scotland, noted that if indexed to inflation, the fees would be in the 12,000-13,000 pounds range.

Meanwhile, universities are faced with rising operational costs, staff salaries, and pension payments. This has forced them to rely on international students — who pay up to 26,000 pounds annually — to subsidise operations.

"When the number of international student numbers was growing, universities grew their staff accordingly and became dependent on them. And in the context of lower levels of income from UK students because of the frozen fees, that dependency on international students has been greater," Professor Sasha Roseneil, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex, said.

In 2022/23, international student fees contributed 11.8 billion pounds to UK universities, amounting to 23% of their total income, up from only 5% in the mid-1990s.

Impact of visa restrictions

Months before being voted out, the Tory government under Rishi Sunak imposed restrictions on international students bringing dependents to the country. It also threatened to discontinue the graduate visa route, which allows graduates to work in the UK for two years. The "unwelcoming" message has sent international enrollments plummeting.

This is more so with other English-language education destinations becoming more attractive in recent years.

"Australia and Canada competing far more aggressively for that student market has made a considerable impact," Professor Mapstone said, adding that the enrollment

of international students has dropped by 30-40% in most institutions this past year.

For instance, the University of Sussex, where international students comprise 30-32% of the student body, saw a 40% drop in international enrollment in autumn 2024 following visa restriction announcements.

Postgraduate taught courses have been hit hardest. Professor Roseneil explained that this was because "mature students" pursuing postgraduate degrees often have families they want to bring. "I think it has particularly affected women... It's often very

difficult for a woman to think, 'I'm going to leave my kids behind and study abroad for a year'," she said.

The University of Surrey experienced a 30% drop in the number of applications. "The drop is actually across South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and also in West Africa," Professor GQ Max Lu said.

EXPLAINED
GLOBAL

The road ahead

UK universities are implementing both immediate cost-cutting measures and longer-term strategic changes.

Many institutions, such as Cardiff University and the University of Sheffield have introduced voluntary severance schemes. "We offered them very generous terms... We're going to have to respond probably by becoming a slightly smaller university," said Professor Koen Lamberts, Vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield.

Universities are also exploring alternative revenue streams.

"We are now looking at all sorts of new ways of increasing income from non-standard activities... Distance learning, online distance learning, CPD (Continuing Professional Development), Executive Education," Professor Roseneil said.

One way to earn some additional revenue is to open international branches. For instance, Surrey University plans a branch in

India. "It's part of the diversification strategy of every university," Professor Lu noted.

At the macro-level, policy changes by the government would help. Professor Mapstone wants the government to consider how visa restrictions might impact certain groups more than others, and said that "students shouldn't be included within the net migration figures". She also wants the government to increase its funding for universities.

Many, like Professor Rudolf Allemann, Pro Vice-Chancellor for International at Cardiff University, anticipate sector restructuring.

"I think we will go through a period of consolidation, some tough decisions will be taken... There may not be quite so many universities, there may be merged institutions," he said, adding that universities need to start developing efficiency-focused teaching models, such as strategic online teaching, which is "clearly a lot less labour-intensive." 54/24/12



PALANIVEL THIAGA RAJAN TAMIL NADU IT AND DIGITAL SERVICES MINISTER

WHY PALANIVEL THIAGA RAJAN

Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, also known as PTR, is Tamil Nadu's IT and digital services minister. He won his first election in 2016 as an MLA, then became finance minister in 2021, a berth he held for two years before his current ministry. He is one of the most articulate voices in the Dravidian politics of his party, the DMK, making a case against the Centre's impending delimitation of constituencies and implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP).



Illustration: Sangeetha Dey

It's not about NEP...can you teach enough children one language properly in UP, Bihar?

Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, Tamil Nadu Minister for IT and digital services, on the rationale behind the protests against the three-language formula, delimitation, bridging the North-South economic divide and India's leverage in global markets. The session was moderated by Managing Editor P Vaidyanathan Iyer

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: What prompted your government to change the rupee symbol from Hindi to a Tamil letter in the Budget? Is it a political statement to prove a point on the Centre's three-language prescription in the National Education Policy (NEP)?

The Budget has just been presented. But there are 100 objections we have to the NEP. The primary issue is that we don't believe in the notion of the NEP. Under the original Constitution, education was a State subject. And relatively speaking, the outcomes across states have been tremendously different over the last 75 years. In fact, the NEP today, much many of the recycled ideas of this government, is not an original concept.

The first NEP was in 1968, the second in 1986, which was amended further in 1992. And this is the third with amendments. We have never accepted any of the NEPs, as we have been constant from Day 1 that somebody sitting in Delhi should not tell us how we should run school education. We oppose moving school education to the Concurrent list from the State list. The NEP of 1968 recommended a three-language policy but made a distinction, it said that in Hindi-speaking states, there should be English-Hindi or rather Hindi-English combinations, and a modern southern language. In non-Hindi-speaking states, it recommended the use of the mother tongue, English and Hindi. In 1986, the parliamentary bill itself admitted that in 18 years, the government had not been able to implement the three-language formula successfully in any place, primarily because of its inability to find the right kind of language teachers in the right places. The bill authors said very explicitly that even though they were recommending the three-language formula, they were doing so for the sake of national unity. They even said that if it was going to be implemented, decisions would have to be taken by the states because they entailed resource constraints and execution problems that could not be mandated or dictated from Delhi. So before we get into what the NEP contains, we are democratically opposed to the notion of somebody from Delhi setting the educational agenda for the state of Tamil Nadu. That's the first point.

ON DELIMITATION GOALS

THE IMPLICATION OF THE 25-YEAR FREEZE ON DELIMITATION WAS THAT STATES WOULD LEVEL UP. WE HAVE KEPT ON INCREASING THE NET TRANSFERS FROM RICH STATES TO POOR STATES BUT THE GAP HAS KEPT ON WIDENING

Second, our performance in the education sector over the last 75 years has been much better. Take any measure of educational progress, be it enrolment in higher education, the number of colleges and universities in the top 100 or the number of patents filed, Tamil Nadu stands tall at number one in the country. For example, the goal for gross enrolment ratio for higher education set by the new NEP has already been crossed by us 10 years ago. So why should somebody in Delhi tell us how and what to improve?

There are some thousand Kendra Vidyalayas (KV), CBSE and ICSE board schools which follow the three-language formula. In fact, data suggests that many of them are not being able to implement the three-language formula properly. In Tamil Nadu, KV schools have 1001 Hindi teachers and 53 Sanskrit teachers but zero Tamil teachers for a third language. That's the problem.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: Do you think the three-language policy is burdensome to schools? Do you have data about why it doesn't work for Tamil Nadu?

As of today, there are roughly 1.08 crore students in Tamil Nadu schools, either government-run or private, under the state board of education. All of them follow the two-language formula. And just to be clear again, education is compulsory in Tamil Nadu. The Madras Presidency had passed the Elementary Education Act in 1920. We ensure compliance, bringing back students to school. We introduced remedial education after Covid to close learning gaps. Education is that important to us. Since there has been rapid influx of children from poorer backgrounds and rural areas, many of them being first-generation high school graduates, we didn't want to burden them with three languages.

Let me point out again that the headquarters of the Tamil Nadu Hindi Prachar Sabha is located in Chennai as it has been from inception. And ours is the only state where Hindi Prachar Sabha has headquarters in Chennai. It has two offices: Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha has headquarters in Chennai, a regional office in Trichy, then one in Kerala, one in Karnataka and one for the combined state of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. They get many subsidies from the government of India. Anybody who is not taking any language, for it. We will not make it compulsory and overload the children's learning curve. That's all.

Liz Mathew: While the BJP is taking on the DMK, many DMK MPs told us that they are not against Hindi, the language, but against its imposition. Language has played a key role in Dravidian politics as has caste. Do you think there's a caste factor, too, in this?

The caste factor is all that is about anti-federalism and the Centre's authoritarianism that has been going on for 11 years in every way, this time in the form of extra-constitutional conditions added in education. But they've also said if you want food, you have to

put the Prime Minister's name on it. All the schemes have to be in Sanskrit or Hindi. There are 100 ways they do it, from money allocation to the extremes of intentionally appointed, obsequious and obsequious persons who refuse to sign bills. Then they send it back. Then we pass it again. Then they send it to the President. That's not in the Constitution. The Supreme Court says so. So they are finding every way to obstruct the will of the people who elected us, their self-interest and right to self-determination.

So do we see this NEP as part of the overall anti-federal authoritarian activities of the government of India? Absolutely so. There's this notion of ultimate arrogance that they are kings as opposed to merely elected representatives, even though there's no constitutional provision for them to tell you what to do.

Liz Mathew: While the BJP is taking on the DMK, many DMK MPs told us that they are not against Hindi, the language, but against its imposition. Language has played a key role in Dravidian politics as has caste. Do you think there's a caste factor, too, in this?

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Arun Janardhan: The issue of language supremacy is older than DMK. The opposition to Hindi, which began in 1930, is the same when it comes to 2025. Is

there any change in the so-called political necessity to oppose Hindi from the DMK's perspective?

From the beginning, Hindi has always been an administrative tool. When Hindi imposition was first attempted during colonial rule in the 1930s, it led to riots and deaths. In the 1960s, it was attempted by the Congress government. If you talk to BJP leaders or anybody who controls Delhi, they would tell you that if you had one language, one uniform

ON THE NORTH-SOUTH GAP

OUR FUTURE WILL BE DETERMINED BY HOW WE FIX THE CORE PROBLEMS OF THE NORTH BECAUSE THE SOUTH IS ONLY ABOUT 25 PER CENT OF THE POPULATION OR LESS. IF I WERE IN DELHI, I WOULD ASK STATES HOW WE COULD PARTNER FOR A GLOBAL MARKET

administrative tool, many DMK members lives easier. But this means subjugation and the disappearance of identity. The homogenisation and removal of our diversity. This is an identity problem. I am referring to CN Annadurai's (DMK founder) speech in the Assembly in 1963. "The consequence of the imposition of Hindi as the official language will create a definite, permanent and significant advantage to the Hindi-speaking states."

Some values are in a culture that is thousands of years older than the language that is the oldest living language today. It's hurt for me to think of another issue that has brought such universal support from across the country, be it from Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, even Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. So I think we have touched upon a nerve. No one person knows best, but no one person's will should be imposed extra-constitutionally on the rest of the country.

ON GROWTH DRIVERS

SUBSIDIES ARE AN INCENTIVE. THEY ARE NOT THE BASIS. SO IF TAMIL NADU HAS CONTINUED TO DO WELL, AND WE HAVE, IT IS BECAUSE OUR HUMAN CAPITAL IS SECOND TO NONE. AT THE END OF THE DAY, THE INDIA STORY IS A HUMAN CAPITAL STORY

Let's go back to this government's 25-year freeze on delimitation. The implication was that sooner or later, states would level up, the growth rates would catch up and population rates would equalise. We have three problems here. First, no other federal government has the kind of power, total fiscal control, total revenue administration that India has. Not even the ones in China, US or even in a small country like Singapore. Second, nowhere else do you find the economy and population divergent. In the US, the highest population states generate the highest revenue and have their own tax control. In China, the coastal areas generate the highest revenue and have their own tax control. In India, it's not like that. The poor states are those with the fastest growing population. The third problem is that unlike Europe, China and the US, where transfers from the well-off to the less well-off bridge the economic gap in industry growth. The data of the last 25 years shows that we have kept on increasing the net transfers from the rich states to the poor states but the gap has kept on widening.

In the last 10 years of this government, for every one rupee of total grants and schemes for States given in Tamil Nadu, UP got Rs 2.90. By 2024, it was Rs 1.1 to Tamil Nadu, Rs 4.30 to UP. In rupee terms, that extra Rs 140 per year is equal to Rs 1 lakh crore a year, between states plus grants, Rs 1 lakh crore per year! Despite this, UP's per capita GDP relative to Tamil Nadu has dropped from 43 per cent to 32-33 per cent. Question arises, how are we ever going to get equal? If you keep on taking the money and are not being able to produce any result, when does that end? Therefore, we have a real worry that our voices won't be heard.

It's not about NEP in Tamil Nadu. The problem is can you teach enough children one language properly in UP and Bihar? Can you improve the growth rate? And I'm saying this as a patriot, not saying it's a relative value. There is no future for a country if, in the present, high population numbers don't see significant improvements in their per capita and overall outcomes. We want that to be fixed. The party in Delhi, which should be focused on this issue, is indulging in to-be-seen-broader, threaten, extort and demand us. That's why we say we don't want to lose any more representation.

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Aravind Sankar: Do you think that states that have done better on key indicators like education and health should have some sort of compensation in the way they are allowed to use funds, raise their own resources, or even have greater autonomy in spending Central funds? Would you reconsider delimitation then?

You have an answer and not a question. When there was no concrete exact plan proposed by my Chief Minister, I had a broader approach that if you are going to do medicalising, it should be accompanied by greater development. That's what happens around the world. The more progressive a democracy and economy, the more the power goes closest to the people. Self-determination comes in the form of a budgetary, philosophical discussion. But at this point, whatever my Chief Minister has said in the official view and I don't have any variance with that.

Ravi Dutt Mishra: The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) recently announced a deep tech fund. Your state is also working on the same. Is there any collaboration considering it is important for the federal structure to work in the face of tech disruptions like ChatGPT and DeepSeek? Our future will be determined by how we fix the core problems of the North-South divide. South is still relatively small, it's only about 25 per cent of the population or less. If we're in Delhi, I would put all the states together and have one collective tackle this global tech. We should basically be persuading the states to understand what's going to be speculating in what and how we can work together. Most of the advanced economies have a huge government role. There's going to be a huge need for human talent in the AI industry. For India this is a win-win situation as it can take a much greater role in the global economy.

Instead, they are playing politics. If we're a conspiracy theorist, it is as they're trying to push the better states down. It's also convenient for them politically, because the better-performing states tend to be non-BJP states and the poor performers tend to be BJP states.

Soumyendra Barik: A few months ago, your counterpart in Karnataka, Prithvi Kharve, wrote a letter to the Centre saying it is allocating funds to electronics and manufacturing as well as subsidies to companies to set up shop in Karnataka. He even hinted at preferential treatment being given to certain states. Is there a similar feeling in Tamil Nadu?

I endorse the sentiment. There's clear political bias in the allocation of funds. But I want to say something very fundamental. At the end of the day, though we're subsidies, 98.9 per cent of the GDP of India comes from the base in Tamil Nadu have not taken a rupee subsidy. At the end of the day, investment is driven by long-term viability, connectivity, talent, infrastructure, quality of life. Subsidies are icing, an additional incentive, they are not the bases. So if Tamil Nadu has continued to do well, and we have, it is because our human capital is second to none. At the end of the day, the India story is a human capital story.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: But in a representative democracy, shouldn't political representation depend on the

Question paper leak

In an unprecedented development that has brought disgrace to the Assam State School Education Board II and the Education Department, all examinations of Class 11 under the Board from March 24 to 29, comprising 36 subjects, were cancelled following reports of several paper leak incidents at different places. The Assam Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has been entrusted with a probe into the paper leak and one hopes it would be able to get to the root of the shocking episode. More than that, it is highly imperative that a stringent protocol of security, vigilance and accountability is put in place to prevent recurrence of what has already become a disturbing trend in both HSLC and HSSLC exams. That the two major Board exams have repeatedly been embroiled in controversies over question paper leak and evaluation not just exposes the unprofessional and incompetent functioning of the Board and the Education Department headed by minister Dr Ranoj Pegu, it has also given the students a huge setback, subjecting them to a traumatic experience. For the young candidates, for whom this particular exam holds a lot of significance, what they have gone through is quite harrowing. The need is to take the development in all seriousness, book the guilty responsible for orchestrating the paper leak, and most importantly, augment the security protocol surrounding the examination process.

The recurring nature of the anomalies makes it amply clear that no lesson has been learnt all these years and the situation bodes ill for the State's educational sphere. The past 10 years have seen a number of such paper leak incidents in HSLC and HSSLC exams, with the last recorded in 2023. With no matching safety protocol put in place, our exams will continue to remain vulnerable to such malpractices. The government would do well to effect a revamp of the examination conduct process at the earliest so that the confidence of students, parents, and the public is restored. As we do not get to hear about such paper leaks during Board exams conducted by the CBSE, the State Board would do well to learn from the CBSE's functioning and replicate its model if necessary. There should be a thorough overhaul of the arrangements in which question papers are printed, transported, stored and opened before the exams. This should be far from a Herculean task, given the technological advancements that can be put to good use for the purpose. With the changing times, innovation is the need of the hour to conduct the exams in a seamless manner. For long, the holding of our Board exams has been mired in controversies stemming largely from the unprofessional conduct of the examination process. This is having the effect of vitiating the academic environment and putting the Board in poor light.

AT/25/6



AFROZ ALAM

Reimagining reservation

Telangana's bold quota reforms must navigate complex challenges

TELANGANA'S DECISION TO raise the OBC quota to 42 per cent and sub-classify 59 Scheduled Castes into three groups marks a pivotal moment in India's affirmative action discourse. While these moves aim to correct historical inequities within marginalised groups, they navigate a complex web of legal constraints, political calculations and empirical challenges. Their success hinges not just on judicial validation and the Centre's approval but on the state's ability to balance social justice with constitutional principles.

The expansion of OBC reservations directly challenges the Supreme Court's 50 per cent quota cap. Telangana's justification rests on its caste survey, presented as a "scientifically rigorous" tool to demonstrate "extraordinary circumstances" — a prerequisite for exceeding the cap. The state argues that OBC backwardness exceeds national averages, warranting exceptional measures. However, Bihar's recent attempt to expand quotas, which failed despite a caste survey, underscores the risks. The Patna High Court rejected Bihar's move, citing flawed methodology in linking caste data to backwardness. Telangana must ensure its survey clearly defines backwardness through socio-economic indicators — education, employment, political representation — rather than relying solely on population figures. Failure to do so could render the policy legally vulnerable, as courts increasingly demand granular evidence of deprivation.

In contrast, the SC sub-classification policy enjoys stronger constitutional footing. The

Supreme Court's August 2024 ruling empowers states to sub-categorise SCs/STs to ensure equitable benefit distribution. This ruling provides constitutional legitimacy to Telangana's move. If the Telangana caste survey successfully demonstrates intra-group disparities, the policy will be legally sound and socially transformative, addressing concerns about unequal access to reservations among historically disadvantaged SC sub-castes.

Politically, Chief Minister Revanth Reddy's Congress government is leveraging these reforms to consolidate OBC and SC voter blocs ahead of local body elections. OBCs and SCs make up over 70 per cent of Telangana's electorate, making them critical to Congress's ability to sustain itself in the state's politics. The timing also aligns with Bihar's elections, where demands for expanded quotas persist after the High Court struck down the state's 65 per cent quota law. By positioning itself as the champion of backward and Dalit communities, Congress aims to counter the BJP's Hindutva-driven OBC outreach.

Nationally, Telangana's policies offer Congress a template to rebrand itself as the party of "empirical social justice", contrasting with the BJP's reluctance to release caste census data. If upheld, these measures could inspire similar laws in Congress-ruled and supported states like Karnataka, Jharkhand and Himachal Pradesh, reshaping the party's appeal ahead of the 2029 general elections. However, the BJP is likely to weaponise legal challenges, framing the reforms as "vote-bank

politics" that undermines merit and unity — a narrative that could resonate with upper-caste and dominant OBC groups.

The linchpin of Telangana's case lies in its caste survey. To justify breaching the 50 per cent cap, the state must prove that OBCs' backwardness is both unique and severe. This requires moving beyond population shares to demonstrate comparative disadvantage — for instance, lower literacy rates or limited access to public services relative to other groups. The survey must also address the Court's skepticism toward caste-centric policies; in the Maratha reservation case (2021), the Court emphasised that "historical disadvantage" alone cannot justify quotas without contemporary evidence of exclusion.

Similarly, SC sub-classification demands meticulous data on representation gaps among sub-castes. The government's commission reports suggest that certain SC sub-castes remain disproportionately underrepresented in government jobs and higher education, but the state must publish disaggregated data on education, employment, and income to pre-empt legal challenges. Transparency in methodology — sampling techniques, survey parameters — will be critical. Bihar's experience shows that courts will reject even populist reforms if the empirical foundation is deemed weak or politically motivated.

Despite its merits, Telangana's reforms face three primary risks. First, legal uncertainty: If the Supreme Court reaffirms the 50 per cent cap without exceptions, the OBC

quota hike collapses. Second, dominant OBC and SC subgroups may resist sub-classification, fearing reduced benefits. Such opposition could fracture the very coalitions the Congress seeks to build. Third, the BJP may exploit implementation delays, accusing the government of "tokenism" while appealing to voters of those castes who may be alienated by quota expansions.

Undoubtedly, Telangana's reforms are a bold attempt to reimagine affirmative action as a dynamic, data-driven tool. If upheld, they could inspire nationwide policy shifts, compelling states to adopt sub-categorisation and prioritise empirical rigour over populist tokenism. Conversely, a judicial strike-down would trigger debates and politics over redefining the affirmative action framework — particularly whether the 50 per cent cap remains relevant in an era of persistent inter-sectional inequalities.

For now, Congress has secured a tactical win, positioning itself as a defender of marginalised sub-castes. However, the enduring legacy of Telangana's experiment depends on the judiciary's willingness to reconcile constitutional principles with ground realities — and the state's capacity to turn legal vindication into tangible social transformation. Either way, India's reservation debate has entered a new, more nuanced phase.

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Books have changed, just like us

KIM SEONG-KON

No one would deny that books are one of the great inventions of human civilization. From books, we learn about other people and other cultures, and we can indirectly experience a world we have never seen. By reading books, we can obtain invaluable information and knowledge, experience epiphanies and profound realizations. Books also broaden the horizon of our minds and quench our thirst for the unknown. In that sense, "A book is a gift you can open again and again," as Garrison Keillor put it.

Sages have acknowledged the importance of books. Carl Sagan once wrote, "One glance at a book and you hear the voice of another person, perhaps someone dead for 1,000 years. To read is to voyage through time."

Indeed, by reading books, we can make a journey into the past as well as the future. George R. R. Martin said, "A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies." It is true that books enable us to live others' lives metaphorically and greatly expand the scope of our perspectives.

The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, too, praised the book, saying "Of all man's instruments, the most wondrous, no doubt, is the book. The other instruments are extensions of his body." He came up with examples: "The microscope, the telescope, are extensions of his sight; the telephone is the extension of his voice; then we have the plow and the sword, extensions of the arm." He concluded, "But the book is something else altogether: the book is an extension of memory and imagination."

Borges lived in the era of printed books, not e-books. If he still lived today, Borges would no doubt be dazzled by the electronic media and the flood of information provided by computers, tablets and mobile phones, all of which have successfully replaced paper books. However, I suspect he would admire these electronic devices that have replaced paper books in our time.

Borges was a true postmodern pioneer who could foresee amazing changes in the future. Even before television was popularized, not to mention computers, he already foresaw the age of virtual reality, in which fiction and fact, fantasy and reality, or truth and fake news, are intricately intertwined.

If he lived today, Borges would state that computers, tablets and mobile phones are different types of books, and thus, they, too, are undoubtedly an extension of our memory and imagination. He would also say that even though the essence of books may never change, the vessels that contain books can alter and vary, depending on different eras.

Indeed, a book does not necessarily have to be printed on paper only. In fact, the form of a book may vary, according to the times. Initially, books began with cave engravings, then with papyrus made with sheepskins. When Gutenberg invented printing types, paper books appeared and have flourished until today.

Therefore, we need to overcome the old-fashioned, narrow mindset that is stuck in the Gutenberg era, breaking the nutshell of our notion of



books. We should be open-minded to cope with rapid and radical changes taking place in our times due to advanced electronic technology.

In the eyes of the younger generation, electronic devices have already replaced paper books. Therefore, the older generation's lamentation that today's young people do not read books because of mobile phones is, in fact, far from the truth. Looking at their smartphones, young people are, in fact, reading books. It would be wrong, therefore, if we thought that only paper books are real books; electronic devices are books, too.

Even electronic books have a variety of types, such as e-books, audiobooks or visual books. There are also webtoons and animations,

which can also be called "books," available on computer screens or mobile phones. The tools for writing, too, will continue to change. In the past, the pen replaced the calligraphy brush. Now, the computer keyboard has replaced the pen. These days, our voice is beginning to replace the keyboard, thanks to voice recognition technology.

Of course, paper books will not vanish overnight. Instead, they will exist side by side with electronic books for a while. The reason is that even though our minds are accustomed to electronics, our bodies are still analog. Eventually, however, paper books will disappear, just like the older generation itself will, and electronic books will replace paper

books, just as the younger generation does the older generation. The process may be slow, and yet surely it will happen. Meanwhile, they will coexist peacefully, and we should pursue harmony between the two.

Reflecting on paper books in this electronic era, we realize that the transition of books resembles that of the human generations. Standing between the two, we realize the unchangeable law of nature called, "transition." We become sad and nostalgic toward what is vanishing, and at the same time, we become excited and hopeful about the new.



The issue is about the 'quality' of India's publications

At a public function, in February 2025, to commemorate National Science Day, the Union Minister for Science and Technology said that "India will overtake the U.S. in the number of scientific publications by 2029". He went on to say that China with 8,98,949 publications is in the lead followed by the United States with 4,57,335 publications, followed by India with 2,07,390 papers. The Chinese research output has both quantity and quality. China's figures are in parallel with the very heavy investments made in the spheres of education and science and technology, and are described in their impressive medium-to-long term plan (MLP) for the development of science and technology launched in several phases since 2006. Investments of a similar high order will be required in India for a significant breakthrough and difference.

An international comparison

The comparison between scientifically advanced countries and India in the matter of money spent on civilian research as a percentage of GDP is shocking. Here are the data for six countries: Israel 6.30%; South Korea 4.9%; Japan, 3.3%; the U.S., 3.46%; Germany 3.13%; China 2.4%, and India 0.67%. Can we even talk about Viksit Bharat 2047 with data like this? Releasing documents such as "India Rankings 2024" by the Department of Higher Education or "Expanding Quality Higher Education through States and State Public Universities" by NITI Aayog are just that – documents that are all sound and fury and signifying nothing.

The scholarly output of India's total publications in all disciplines including science and engineering for 2024 (Clarivate), on February 25, 2025, stands at 1,91,703; the corresponding number for the U.S. is 6,48,905. These numbers are slightly different from those given by the Minister, but the conclusion is the same. The fact is that India cannot overtake the U.S. by 2029. Clarivate further depicts the CNCI value (quality indicator of publications) and places India at just 0.879 as opposed to 1.12 and 1.25 for China and the U.S., respectively. Out of 30 ranked countries, India stands at a glorious 28.

The Minister's sense of delusory self-comfort in having 5,351 Indian scientists figure in the list of the top 2% of scientists across the world in 2023 is downright bizarre. Rankings of India's 5,351 scientists range from 163 (highest) to 68,55,948 (lowest). In contrast, in Japan, 5,608 scientists figure in the top 2%, with their ranks ranging from 79 to 26,24,763.

Similarly, Germany has 10,420 scientists in the list of top 2%, ranging in ranks from 6 to



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Science officials need to figure out why India's publications are so bad in terms of 'quality' rather than exhibit delusory self-comfort about 'quantity'

10,80,081. The numbers speak for themselves.

The real benchmarks

Quantity is not quality. What is the quality of Indian publications when they are held up against harsh international benchmarks such as the Hirsch Index (H-Index) of our scientists and the Impact Factor (IF) of the journals where we publish? What is important is whether a paper is read widely, is useful to others, and, in the ultimate test, whether it is cited by one's peers. When judged by these benchmarks, the Minister's remarks smack of smug narcissism, nothing more.

There are journals and journals. Bradford's empirical law of concentration of journal articles in scientific periodicals (1934) is applicable to the research productivity of ranked Higher Education Institutions (HEI). It states that articles in a given subject concentrate heavily in a relatively small number of highly productive journals.

One of us has been a research chemist for 50 years and a representative analysis using the ISI Thomson Web of Science, of papers published in the three top chemistry journals between 2017 and 2024 (both years inclusive) is revealing. The figures for the U.S., China and India (in that order) are: *Angewandte Chemie International Edition* (IF 16.60; numbers of papers: 4554, 10305, 501), *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, JACS, (16.38; 8503, 5521, 305), and *Chemical Communications* (6.22; 2553, 9820, 1347). The relative Indian contribution goes up as the impact factor (IF) of the journal goes down. In any event, India compares poorly with China and the U.S.

A more detailed look at these statistics shows that the Indian position is fundamentally flawed. Considering only papers in JACS, it is seen that the Chinese Academy of Sciences, CAS, (444) has nearly 15 times the number of papers as all the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) laboratories in India put together (29). The great breadth of the Chinese output in these CAS papers is also noteworthy.

Continuing with JACS papers between 2017 and 2024 (both years inclusive), not only do the prestigious CAS and Peking University (359) have high outputs but also the next tier of universities such as Tsinghua (289), Fudan (214), Nanjing (284), Nankai (258), Jilin (145), Xiamen (241) and Sun Yat-sen (145). All the Indian Institutes of Technology taken together have only 68 papers in this journal in the above-mentioned time period. All the IITs put together are five times less than just one second-tier Chinese university. Nothing in India measures up to the Chinese yardstick. There will be a real pay-off only if India invests in

training young people in the universities well. This is where China has correctly placed its money, and where India is off track.

Even as the scope and spread of the malaise in Indian science is justified through quantifiable metrics, a sense of false security has crept in, entrenched by self-deluding statements such as this one from one of the highest officials in Indian Science and Technology, the Principal Scientific Adviser, that "India is rapidly becoming a global research powerhouse". Such statements deliberately mislead and obfuscate.

Questionable ethics and practices in India

The perverse incentives which characterise Indian science and technology have resulted in the cancerous growth of downright fraud and unethical practices. The scale of the problem has become all-pervasive, and has brought international ignominy to India. By 2020, the science and technology complex of India had degraded so rapidly that a wave of retractions, paid publications, publications in fake journals, and downright piracy began to inundate India's science and technology output. The existence of so many fraudulent papers is only possible when the entire system is clientelist and based on trading favours.

In 2019, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed a District Court decision against the Hyderabad-based Omics group arising from a suit instituted by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The FTC clinched a \$50 million fine against the group for, *inter alia*, misrepresenting its peer review practices, its editorial board members, its journals' impact factors, and deceptive indexing claims. All in all, around 69,000 articles were published by the Omics group with little or no peer review, polluting the global scientific corpus for years to come.

India has perfected the art of spurious, low quality, and potentially outright fabricated scientific output being accommodated in questionable journals, mostly as a means for scientists to justify their mandated minimum number of published research pieces. A study in 2018 estimated that 62% of all standalone fake journals in the world are published in India, and around 10% of the entire country's total research output may be fake to begin with.

It is better if the Minister asks the science departments to figure out why the quality of India's publications is so bad instead of dwelling on the quantity. As Einstein said, "Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted."

The views expressed are personal

The CBSE's 'two-exam scheme' overcomplicates things

The draft scheme by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to allow, from 2026, students of Class 10 to take their board examinations twice in an academic session (tentatively scheduled for February/March and in May) has been positioned as a student-friendly reform aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The proposed shift, titled "Draft Scheme for Two Examinations, Class X from 2026", is meant to reduce the immense pressure on students, offer them an additional opportunity to improve their scores, and move towards a more holistic assessment model. On paper, this seems to be a progressive step, but a closer look at the draft policy reveals several operational, financial, and pedagogical concerns that could ultimately make the system more cumbersome rather than more effective.

Logistical issues, more stress

While the NEP 2020 calls for a shift towards conceptual learning and competency-based assessment, the CBSE's draft policy focuses primarily on scheduling and logistics. The draft states that board exams will test 'core capacities/competencies rather than months of coaching and memorization', but it remains unclear how question papers will be redesigned to reflect this shift. Without further clarity there is a risk that the emphasis on multiple examinations may still lead to 'coaching-driven preparation' rather than genuine conceptual learning. Instead of reducing student anxiety, this reform might result in students preparing intensively for two rounds of examinations rather than one, exacerbating rather than alleviating the burden.

The logistical demands of implementing this scheme are daunting. The CBSE's own data projects that 26.6 lakh students will appear for the Class 10 examinations in 2026. With two examination cycles, the number of answer scripts for evaluation will exceed 1.72 crore. Managing this scale effectively requires a vast pool of evaluators and a system that ensures uniform grading standards.

The overlap with the Class 12 examinations ('about 20 lakh students in 2026') adds another layer of administrative complexity, stretching



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The CBSE's draft scheme for Class 10 students seems progressive but a closer look raises operational, financial and pedagogical concerns

school resources and placing an additional burden on the teachers responsible for evaluation. Schools will have to conduct multiple examinations for the same subjects at different times, secure and manage question papers across multiple test windows, and ensure fairness in the allocation of examination dates. All of this could become a significant logistical challenge.

The policy also raises questions on whether the proposed time gap between the two examinations would be sufficient for meaningful remediation. For example, students who do not perform well in February will have only about two months to prepare for the second attempt in May. This short window makes it difficult for students to make a genuine effort to improve their conceptual understanding. Without structured remedial support from schools, many may just attempt to re-memorise material rather than addressing fundamental gaps in their learning. This contradicts the NEP's stated vision of reducing dependence on rote learning and fostering deeper understanding.

The issue of examination fees and equity

The financial implications of this scheme could also disproportionately affect economically weaker students. The policy mandates an enhanced (and non-refundable) examination fee to be collected at the time of registration, covering both examination attempts. This means that students who are confident about appearing only once will still have to pay for two examinations, imposing an unnecessary financial burden. For students from marginalised backgrounds, this cost increase could be a significant barrier, contradicting the NEP's broader goal of equitable education. If private coaching centres begin capitalising on the two-examination format by offering specialised coaching for the second attempt, the policy might further entrench inequalities in educational access.

The impact of this scheme on school calendars and the transition to Class 11 also requires further scrutiny. If results for the second examination are only declared by June-end, this compresses the admission cycle for higher secondary education. Schools typically begin their academic session in April or May, which means that students awaiting

the second examination results might face delays in securing admission or finalising subject streams. This could create confusion for both students and school administrators, particularly in States where Class 11 admissions are already a competitive and tightly scheduled process.

What should be done

If the CBSE genuinely wants to align itself with the NEP's vision, it must go beyond logistical restructuring and ensure that competency-based assessments are effectively implemented. A structured remedial programme should be integrated between the two examinations so that students who perform poorly in the first attempt have a real chance at improvement rather than just getting another opportunity to attempt the same test. The examination fee structure should be revised to ensure that students who opt for only one attempt are not penalised financially.

While there are reports that a pilot is under way in 30 schools in the science and social science subjects, where students are being assessed internally at two levels based on their choice, the ultimate design of the policy must still undergo a thorough review of these pilot outcomes. Any broader implementation should be in phases, beginning with additional pilot programmes in different regions. A trial phase in varied contexts would allow policymakers to assess practical challenges, refine logistics and gather feedback from schools, teachers and students before expanding it to the national level. Without such a phased approach, the scale of this change could lead to serious administrative challenges that disrupt rather than improve the board examination system.

The intention behind the reform is commendable, but intent alone is not enough. A scheme of this magnitude requires careful planning, clear communication, and a genuine commitment to shifting India's assessment culture towards holistic and meaningful learning. As it stands, the CBSE's two-examination policy risks becoming another bureaucratic overhaul that increases complexity without addressing the core issues that plague India's school examination system.

The views expressed are personal

How education can learn from the experiences of astronauts

ARUNA PARANDHAMA

What was meant to be an eight-day visit turned into an unplanned nine-month stay in space for Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore. Their presence in and departure from the ISS make a compelling trope for reorientation and adaptation in a world that is constantly evolving and is rife with uncertainties. The fundamental process of unlearning, learning, and relearning is paramount to human progress, not just in space travel, but in the domain of education, which nurtures the world's most valuable assets—students, who are still reeling under the effects of the pandemic-induced learning deficits.

In 2018, *The Guardian* reported the worrisome trend among students exposed to screens, indicating their inability to cope with prolonged pen usage, weakening their fine motor skills. Recent data from the National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) in the United States in 2025 highlight the significant disparity in literacy and numeracy skills between high and emerging learners. According to the Annual *Status of Education Report* (ASER), 2023, 42% of pupils aged 12 to 18 in rural India cannot read simple sentences. Addressing these gaps is imperative since they directly affect the future of our students and society.

As various stakeholders in academia negotiate the difficulties of diminishing literacy, the Williams-Wilmore ISS odyssey offers insightful lessons on the importance of reorientation and adaptation in education. Rising techno-schools have given digital instruction top priority, often at the expense of fine motor skills. Studies on the ISS reveal that the astronauts developed problems with muscular coordination following extended microgravity exposure, which calls for rehabilitation upon returning. Similarly, intentional handwriting practice is still absolutely essential for

hand dexterity even as schooling moves toward digital tools. Gradually abandoning this skill in the pursuit of modernity may hinder students' ability to adapt in an ever-evolving world.

Prominent publications like *The Guardian* and *Adelaide Now* indicate that educational experts in Australia are expressing concern over schools prioritising the breadth of content rather than its depth. A noticeable trend here is the reduction of academic standards, ostensibly to accommodate diverse learners. An entire generation of students has experienced the pandemic, making it essential to reacquire and restore skills that were either lost or acquired late owing to this interruption. Likewise, although Williams and Wilmore clocked 565 hours in space, a battalion of researchers and medical professionals is deeply engaged in their rehabilitation to readjust to Earth's environment. We must consider if we are prepared to invest in our most valuable future assets—our stu-

dents—to assist them in recovering and enhancing the skills they have lost or acquired late. However, the latest budget has not yet allocated any funding for the same.

In 2020, a persistent trend in the high-stakes board examinations was the introduction of Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs), especially in subjects like language and literature, to alleviate students' stress. How can educators solve this dead horse theory of which skill to inculcate in academia? Although writing and typing are categorised as fine motor skills, research from PubMed on memory, cognition, and literacy demonstrates that handwriting elicits superior brain activation, leading to improved memory retention, accelerated learning, and greater comprehension. A 2020 study from IIT Mumbai showed that students who engaged in handwriting achieved more outstanding performance in language assessments by 15% compared to those who utilised tablets for assignments.

There is a dire need for pupils to be adaptable and prepared for the future. The space exploration experiences of Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore demonstrate that flexibility and reorientation are crucial for survival and progress. Although proficient in their domain, the astronaut duo functioned as mere learners; they underwent continuous training to operate in both extraterrestrial and terrestrial environments.

Similarly, educational institutions must equip students to excel in digital and analogue learning modalities (without favouring one over the other) rather than disregarding fine motor abilities or simplifying the system to accommodate emerging learners. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that literacy is no longer singular but plural. The United Kingdom is a leader in integrating multimodal literacies into its curriculum. This new definition suggests that meaning-making occurs through multiple modalities.

The United States has mandated cursive writing instruction in schools to mitigate over-digitisation problems, whereas Sweden is doing away with digital tools and reintroducing traditional learning. Achieving a balance between digital and traditional education is a nuanced endeavour, as both skills are indispensable in contemporary society. A robust education system is one that constantly offers space and resources to bounce back from the effects of unforeseen eventualities. However, our nation has yet to deliberate in the essential discussions and debates about how much digitisation is too much. Equipping students to navigate different conditions is vital; neglecting this responsibility is a disservice to our future citizens, rendering them unprepared for the challenges of a swiftly transitioning world.

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Addressing student suicides

The Supreme Court's decision to set up a National Task Force to address the mental health concerns of students and prevent suicides recognises a problem that is increasingly becoming a crisis in the educational sector. There are frequent reports of suicide by students not only from higher educational institutions and institutes like the IITs but also from schools. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data show that there were over 13,000 student suicides in 2022, about 500 more than in 2020. It is a matter of concern that thousands of young persons snuff out their lives. The court said the deaths are a grim reminder of how inadequate and ineffective existing frameworks are in addressing the mental health concerns of students. It said they point to the need for a more "robust, comprehensive and responsive mechanism to address the various factors" that drive students to suicide.

The task force is to be headed by a former Supreme Court judge, Justice Ravindra Bhat. It cannot provide a solution to the problem but can study the matter and make recommendations. It will include representatives of various fields that are relevant to the issue. It has been told to prepare a report on the factors that lead to student suicides such as academic pressure, ragging, sexual harassment, financial burden and discrimination based on caste, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Experiences related to all these can have an impact on the minds of students. More and more students are entering schools and colleges every year. Competition and pressure to perform are increasing, putting a high burden on them. Any issue can act as a trigger, depending on the personal situation of the students. Society is getting more complex, and individuals have to respond to many issues which may not have existed before, or existed in different forms or may have drawn different responses. Many of the safety valves that may have existed in the past are no longer available. Schools and colleges reflect society and many of the issues and situations in society exist there too, with greater resonance. Young people, being sensitive and inexperienced in life, find it difficult to cope with them.

The wellbeing of students is the collective responsibility of the society, including parents, teachers, the authorities of schools, colleges, universities and other institutions and the governments. Unfortunately, all of them have a tendency to engage in mutual blame games. Every one of these needs to reform their thinking, conduct and policies and work in unison to ensure the students' wellbeing. Many of the issues are known, and the Supreme Court's initiative may help to provide more useful pointers.

National Task Force cannot promise solutions but can recommend measures for student wellbeing

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BEYOND POLITICS

In a recent written reply in the Lok Sabha, the minister of state for education, Jayant Chaudhary, stated that schools in North Indian states generally refrained from teaching South Indian languages as the third Indian language. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, to cite an example, prefer to offer Sanskrit and Urdu, while Madhya Pradesh gives the options of Sanskrit, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and Marathi in this category. The National Education Policy of 1968 mandated a three-language formula comprising the mother tongue, English, and a southern language for Hindi-speaking states and Hindi for the southern states as the third language. NEP 2020

modified this further, offering the option of teaching any Indian language as the third language. It may be pertinent to cite the finding of another study in this context. A report based on earlier population censuses and compiled

by the Registrar General of India had found that a rise in the number of Hindi speakers between 1991 and 2011 had corresponded to a precipitous decline in native speakers of languages like Tamil, Bengali and Urdu. On juxtaposing these two data sets, it may be reasonable to agree with the argument — anxiety — of states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala that there is, indeed, an imbalance as far as the teaching of languages is concerned and that the NEP is an ideological and policy vehicle to impose Hindi south of the Vindhyas.

But India's linguistic map and ground realities are far more complex and elude simplistic assumptions and accusations. Consider the inference, derived from the 2011 Census, that every Indian state has at least 10,000 speakers — if not more — of no less than five languages and that non-Hin-

di speakers are more willing to learn new languages. Given the ongoing demographic transitions, such as a rise in inter-state migration, as well as the traditional diversity in languages in India, sticking to a two-language formula, as Tamil Nadu's minders are keen on doing, chiefly for electoral reasons, may actually be doing a disservice to the cause of multilingualism.

There is a need to examine the ongoing debate on linguistic choices beyond the ken of shrill politics and ideology. The NEP's stated intent, at least, is to diversify linguistic choice. This may be a sensible initiative in a country with multiple languages. But some critical issues must be kept in mind

Practicality,
not politics,
should guide
language policy
in India

while addressing this complex but fascinating matter. The primary consideration as far as the choice of the third language is concerned should be its practicality and utility. Tamil as a third language in, say, Uttar Pradesh would

serve no end; the same could be said of Sanskrit even without bringing in the issue of the poor standards of teaching of classical languages. The second, equally important, aspect pertains to the question of representation. If non-Hindi-speaking states are being nudged towards multilingualism, the same should hold true for the Hindi belt that is known to be notoriously conservative in terms of its linguistic preference, sticking to a Hindi-dominated monolingual culture. The southern states have a point in this regard. Finally, the language policy should be free of intimidation and be flexible, responsive to the needs of local populations in terms of the changing social, economic and demographic realities. If India is to do justice to its languages, it should shun politics and embrace practicality.

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