

Interview

"Students need to develop 21st century skills which are analytical, applied and outcome oriented": M.K. Sridhar



S. RAJENDRAN



Reason to cheer: The Nalsarians throwing their head gears into the air marking the passing-out during the Seventeenth Annual convocation of NALSAR University of Law in Hyderabad on July 27, 2019. Photo: Nagara Gopal / The Hindu

Prof M.K. Sridhar , Member of the committee to draft the National Education Policy 2019 has been an educationist all through and has also served as Member Secretary and Executive Director of Karnataka Knowledge Commission and Karnataka State Innovative Council. He is also President of Centre for Educational and Social studies as well as ICSSR Senior Fellow at ISEC, Bangalore.

He is basically a teacher and researcher for more than two and half decades having completed 10 research projects, guided successfully nine PhD scholars and four MPhil students in areas like central excise, HR practices, marketing strategies, business incubators, voluntary organisation, MSMEs, agriculture marketing, healthcare innovation and gross national happiness.

In this interview with S. Rajendran, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Bengaluru, Sridhar speaks on the manner in which the new Education Policy would give a new direction to the system of education over the next 20 to 30 years.

The draft National Education Policy 2019 was in the public domain for the views of the people. Being a member of the high-level committee to draft the new policy, what is your view on transforming the system of education in the country?

Now that the last date for public comments on draft NEP has expired, there is the likelihood that the draft policy will be implemented without major changes.

The proposed policy would give a vision, dream, and direction for Indian education over the next 20 to 30 years. It will also result in building a new India with the help of new aspirations, fresh ideas and innovative approach. It will unleash the potential of India as a dynamic and sustainable knowledge society by empowering the individuals and institutions with autonomy and flexibility.

A new era of diversity, flexibility and grass root orientation will be witnessed in the years to come. It is likely to provide a new narrative for education by having India centred education with strong emphasis on Indian context and content. This is how the draft NEP is expected to transform the education system in our country.

Related article: **Radhakrishnan, A. 2019. "[Draft New Education Policy and Schools for the Skilling Age](#)", The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, September 16.**

There is a view that a covert attempt is being made to pull out Education from the concurrent list and place it in the central list and that such an attempt is one among the motives of the National Education Policy. Is it, right?

The Constitution of India has provided for three kinds of lists which deal with the subjects to be addressed by the Centre and the State Governments. They are central, State and concurrent lists. Initially, Education was included in the central list of the Constitution of India. Subsequently, it was brought into the concurrent list as a result of which both Central and State governments had a joint responsibility. This historical and Constitutional provision has been considered and respected by NEP in letter and spirit. There is no question of the policy making a covert attempt to alter this spirit nor its motive even by any figment of imagination. The federal structure and spirit has been well reflected in the policy beyond doubt.



Prof. M.K. Sridhar

This is amply brought out not only in the introduction but also in many recommendations of the policy. State Governments have full freedom with regard to school education. Complete autonomy has been proposed not just to the Universities but to the colleges also even to the extent of awarding degrees. Every State could have their Rajya Shiksha Aayog under the chairmanship of the respective Chief Minister. In fact, Rashtreeya Shiksha Aayog consists of Chief Ministers as members as well as Joint Review and Monitoring Board by Central and state Governments. Hence, the policy advocates and promotes the joint responsibility of the Centre and State Governments as regards education.

There is not a single private or Government run university in the country which ranks high among the top universities of the world. What are the drawbacks in the country's educational system?

There are many agencies which conduct annual ranking of top universities of the world. Indian universities are hardly found in that list and even if they are found, they are negligible in terms of numbers as well as the ranks. There are minuscule exceptions to this trend. Such a trend of Government or private University not figuring in the top ranking makes anybody feel disappointed considering the size of the system as well as the presence of world renowned Universities like Nalanda and Takshashila in the past.

But, at the same, this cannot be over simplified but needs thorough and deep analysis not only on WHY but also on HOW. There are issues like the age old education philosophy of India considered as noble, the constraints in resources, the incompatibility of some parameters to the Indian context, inappropriate governance structure, faulty regulation, availability of faculty, possibility of philanthropic support etc are only some of the reasons for the poor ranking of Indian Universities . The efforts of the Government of India through the scheme of Institutions of Excellence (IOEs) and the recommendation of NEP to have research Universities, the constitution of National Research Foundation go a long

way in setting right this trend and would enable our Universities to figure among the top ranking ones of the world.

Is there a way out of the regulatory system in the field of education? There are too many controls resulting in a high level of corruption particularly in the field of medical and engineering education.

The regulatory system of higher education in India is characterized by too many institutions on one hand and too many controls on the other. Each of these institutions performs multiple functions like funding, setting standards, accreditation and regulation in their respective disciplines. For example, Bar Council of India, Medical Council, Dental Council etc. perform multiple functions in their respective disciplines. Further, they are bodies run by professionals who may or may not have education/academic/research background. These bodies are not professional enough to perform all functions. This seems to be the bane of the present regulatory mechanism for higher education in India. The passage of Medical Education Commission Bill is a testimony to this.

The Draft NEP comes out with a remedy to this. Having independent national bodies for performing each of the functions for all higher education institutions in all disciplines and restricting the role of discipline based professional bodies to the professional standard setting leaving the education to the Universities. This would end monopoly on one hand and separate functions on the other. This feature of NEP would go well to stem the rot in the regulatory arena of higher education in India.

Private universities have mushroomed across the country and most of them are focused on commercialization of education rather than providing quality education. What are your views on this development?

State after State in India are establishing private universities either in greenfield or already established categories in different areas. Most of them are promoted by entrepreneurs (even though in the name of Trust/Foundation) with an exception of genuine philanthropic and corporate entities under CSR. There is

also a trend of few persons with an innovative spirit establishing Universities. This was totally absent in the Indian context all these years.

This has resulted in an increase of students in private universities even by paying hefty fees and decline in the numbers of public and state-run ones. This is a quiet alarming trend as there is growing commercialization. At the same time, there is need for innovation, out of box thinking and experimentation which could possibly be brought by private universities due to many reasons.

One way to check this trend is to strengthen with tight regulation and more and more public disclosure. The audit mechanism has to be very tough like that of Section 8 of Companies Act that is applicable to not for profit ones. These institutions have to be regulated against their public disclosures. Such transparency coupled with accountability will address this menace considering the role and contribution of private institutions.

The opinion of the industry is that most of the graduates, owing to the poor quality of education, cannot be employed. What are the changes that need to be brought about in the system of education?

Traditionally, Indian education has laid a lot of emphasis on academics without much practical orientation. It has resulted in more of theories, writing the examinations and being awarded marks. This system of education has not given much emphasis on competencies, skills or employability that are needed to perform at the work place. The students have developed the habit of scoring marks and expecting employment without understanding whether they have the skills of performing them or not. This has been compounded by the institutions and teachers attitude of teaching, testing and awarding degrees.

On the other hand, there is another extreme of developing only the placement capacity after education. Educational institutions have become placement agencies. It means that our education is laying emphasis on two extremes-one on theory building without any applied skills and the other only on placement without much education.

This scenario has to undergo changes. The students need to develop 21 century skills which are analytical, applied and outcome oriented. These competencies would make them to perform and contribute rather than mere read, write and score. Some of the changes suggested in the draft NEP include a liberal arts education in under graduation, creative combination of subjects, introduction of vocational education as part and parcel of education, changes in the assessment, measures to consider outcomes like graduate attributes etc. The institutional structures have to be made flexible and autonomous and they must bring about diversity and innovation in their curriculum.

Nearly a half of the country's population is in the younger age groups and providing them with appropriate education is the need of the hour. What should be the role of the Government in this matter?

India today is a young country with a favourable demographic dividend for the next couple of decades. Hence, there is need for providing and imparting appropriate education. Appropriate education means that kind of education which enables our youth by swimming in the ocean of 5000 plus years of culture, tradition and civilisation on one hand and also equip them to fly to greater heights in future. An education based on our past, lives in the present and prepare them for future is the need of the hour. They have to understand Indian perspective and knowledge systems as well as the latest and contemporary knowledge in various disciplines in addition to building competencies and skills. The course design, the curriculum and the assessment methods of our education must be modern, holistic and outcome oriented.

In the matter of school education, State Government's across the country focus on petty issues like language of study or the medium of instruction rather than laying a good foundation for children at the school level. Can there be a uniform all India policy in school education?

Considering the study language or the medium of instruction at school education level as petty issues is very unfortunate. In fact, the foundational dimensions of a

child's learning are its literacy and numeracy. Therefore, the study of language as well as study in the mother tongue as a medium of instruction is very critical for the cognitive development of children. All over the world, the study of language is considered as study of culture, behaviour and attitude of a civilization. Multi-lingualism has to be promoted by all means. Study of Indian languages in our country makes a student strong enough not only in terms of communication but also in perspective building.

The issue of having uniform policy with regard to school education in the entire country deserves discussion. Even though, education is in the concurrent list, the State governments have a primary responsibility in school education. In view of this, a uniform school education policy is not possible. Only a core policy on school education for the entire country can be had. Every State has to have their own considering their realities, contexts and resources as well as challenges.

What are the suggestions to raise the standards of education across public schools in the country, for preparing instruction material and for teacher training?

One of the very important and the most crucial player of school education in the country is the public schooling system. Their numbers and the profile of students studying there makes them not only vulnerable but critical for the socio-cultural-economic development of a society. Many a times, the right spirited value systems are preserved more in public schools. The resources deployed for them are of very high magnitude. A recent trend that is evident is the decline in the enrolment of students in Government schools. This is the only hope for large sections of society who are vulnerable and prone to evils.

Under the circumstances, the only way is to improve the quality in school education. The proposed National Education Policy has recommended few measures. The concept of school complex for public schools located in a geographical cluster without physically co-locating them. They will be brought under a new administrative and academic unit in a cluster. The educational and

other resources could be shared in order to develop a school climate among the primary schools.

This recommendation was made by the Kothari Commission. Another measure which goes in the long way in improving public schooling system is the robustness of teacher education in the form of four-year integrated teacher education programs. In addition, many suggestions are made with regard to curriculum, assessment, foundational literacy and numeracy as well as the entire regulatory system of school education. As a result, the public school system is expected to perform better and address the learning crisis.

The focus in recent years has been on technical, management and medical education. Are there efforts to create world class liberal arts universities with the focus on the humanities, social sciences and pure sciences?

Recent years have witnessed focus on professional education like engineering, medical and management. The number of students and institutions have also grown by leaps and bounds. Many stand-alone Universities have also come up in different States. Other Universities have been reduced to general Universities without any professional courses. As a result, not just colleges but Universities have become mono or limited faculty institutions.

In view of such a trend, NEP has recommended multi-disciplinary colleges and Universities which offer a variety of courses in multi-disciplinary setting whether professional or otherwise. In this regard, NEP also recommends liberal arts nomenclature in under-graduate programmes in higher educational institutions. Students can choose a creative combination of subjects as major and minor. There will be no classification of subjects into arts, science or commerce etc. Gradually, this liberal arts approach could be extended to professional courses also. This way, higher education will transform in the days to come based on National Education Policy.

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In a journalistic career of nearly 40 years with The Hindu in Karnataka, he has extensively reported on and analysed various facets of life in the State. He holds a Master's degree from the Bangalore University. The Government of Karnataka, in recognition of his services, presented him the Rajyotsava Award - the highest honour in the State - in 2010. He can be contacted at srajendran.thehindu@gmail.com].