

Book Review Symposium: Maya John (Ed), *Debating Education in India: Issues and Concerns* (New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2023), pp 300, Hardcover, ISBN- 978-81-956392-4-3

Avijit Pathak

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Amrita Sastry

Jesus and Mary College of the University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Mandvi Mishra

University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Avijit Pathak, *Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

As a teacher, I have always celebrated the idea and practice of critical pedagogy, and striven for a kind of education that liberates our consciousness from the logic of domination, and inspires us to move towards an egalitarian society. Hence, *Debating Education in India*— the volume Maya John has edited—arouses my interest. As an Indian, I am aware of the challenges confronting the realm of education in a caste-ridden/class-divided society like ours which has further been tormented by the neoliberal assault, as well as the aggression of hyper-nationalist politics. Yes, what is happening in the realm of education in India needs to be debated. Indeed, the issues are diverse and many—from the reproduction of social inequality through a stratified and hierarchical chain of educational institutions to the normalization of social Darwinism or hyper-competitiveness for upward social mobility. From the mushrooming growth of education shops to the naked commodification of ‘job-oriented’ education, and

from the increasing attack on public universities that critique the virus of market fundamentalism. As well as religious nationalism to the legitimization of online education in a country with heightened digital divide.

With keen interest and curiosity, as I begin to read the rigorous, historically enriched and politically sensitive introductory note written by Maya John, I get an idea of what this volume with its eleven essays seeks to communicate with us. Let me quote her:

Reflecting on the importance of formal public-funded mass education, this volume strives to highlight the crucial fault lines of contemporary educational policy in India, as well as the long trajectory of educational inequalities against whose backdrop policy paradigms need to be assessed.

It is therefore, not surprising that an alert reader of this volume will be repeatedly reminded by its contributors of the latent as well as the manifest functions of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)—the document that has generated an interesting debate among educationists in the country, particularly at a time when the ruling political regime, as many suspect, is in tune with the alliance of neoliberalism and cultural/religious nationalism. Well, when I begin to read the draft of the NEP 2020, I see an apparently wonderful garland of pedagogically enriched concepts and educational ideals. For instance, the policy, we are told strives for an ‘equitable and just society’. It speaks of the need for the pedagogy that should make education ‘more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible and enjoyable’; and it encourages the idea of a ‘multidisciplinary university’.

Furthermore, the goal of higher education, the document states is to develop ‘intellectual curiosity, scientific temper, creativity, spirit of science and 21st century capabilities across a range of disciplines including sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities, languages as well as professional, technical and

vocational subjects.’ It is really difficult not to get carried away by these wonderful ideals.

However, what distinguishes this book is its determined effort to look beyond what Maya John sees as the ‘politics of words in NEP 2020’; this policy, as John has written in her perceptive essay, seeks to ‘conceal the exclusionary principle-cum-ideology and the privatization agenda of the ruling regime’. In fact, as one reads the draft of NEP 2020 with care and alertness, it is difficult not to see the ‘inherent tendency of privatization’. To quote her, “the repeated use in NEP 2020 of the terminology like ‘philanthropic private participation’ represents a foiled reference to the government’s intention to facilitate a greater quantum of private capital investment in school and higher education”.

Furthermore, a careful look at the policy document indicates the possibility of a ‘stage-wise mechanism of granting graded autonomy to colleges, through a transparent system of graded accreditation’. However, John critiques this sort of ‘reactionary technocratic assumption’ that the procedures of accreditation by themselves ensure a level playing field. Problematically, it is likely to perpetuate ‘the prevailing inequality that exists between different colleges within a public-funded university and between different universities across the country’.

In fact, Mohd. Bilal’s somewhat angry essay further sharpens this critique. Throughout our history—even during the anti-colonial struggle, or even successive post-colonial governments, he sees the all-pervading ‘educational apartheid’. And even before the neoliberal assault, as Bilal asserts, one could see the ‘elitist bias’ against quality mass education. But then ‘why is it that the so-called critics from the mainstream left or the Dalit-Bahujan movement conveniently ignore the inequality at the school level which has been instrumental in creating a hierarchy of ‘merits’ that pits the disadvantaged against the privileged few?’ In a way, the question Bilal raises is likely to make the progressive intelligentsia somewhat introspective and self-critical.

Another distinctive feature of NEP 2020 is its celebration of Indian civilization—its ancient centres of learning, and its, history, music, medicine, philosophy, culture and above all, the 64 *kalas* or arts mentioned in Sanskrit literature. At a time when the discourse of assertive Hindu nationalism seeks to become hegemonic, this volume reminds us of the possible dangers implicit in this act of glorification, or the urge to become a ‘Vishwa Guru’. In this context, Kumkum Roy’s essay acquires its relevance. While celebrating the ‘knowledge of India’, NEP 2020, Roy argues, ‘erases and obliterates memories of the multiplicity and diversity of Indian traditions and reduces them with a monolithic, uniform frame of reference’. For instance, as Roy reminds us, ‘contacts with China, Southeast Asia, East Africa, West Asia, Central Asia and the Mediterranean world in the pre-colonial context as well as the complex colonial encounter—which enriched and transformed knowledge systems within the subcontinent—find no space within this framework’.

Even though NEP 2020 speaks of ‘equitable and inclusive education’, the fact is that, as Jyoti Raina argues in her essay, ‘it sidesteps the structural question altogether’. A new vocabulary like ‘public philanthropic partnership’ sounds good. However, Raina doubts whether it is capable of eliminating contemporary social realities like ‘economic inequality, domination of private capital, graded social hierarchies, exacerbated multilayers in the educational system, patriarchal barriers to gender justice, caste fault lines and an impending economic crisis for the common people.’ Not solely that. For NEP 2020, ‘the notion of citizenship’, Raina argues, ‘is linked with productivity in a neoliberal commonsense rather than with a civil knowledge common to diversity in a democracy’. It starts right from school education. It is essentially, a quest for a ‘skilled workforce, particularly involving mathematics, computer science and data science’!

Likewise, Madhu Prasad debunks what NEP 2020 emphasizes as ‘merit alone’—the sole criterion for accreditation, eligibility and assessment. This is

like denying all historical manifestations of privilege and discrimination. This sort of ‘competitive and market- oriented concept of merit’, as Prasad cautions us, ‘can only reinforce the hold of the privileged, thereby strengthening existing inequalities and injustices.’ As a champion of ‘transformational and emancipatory education’, Prasad is critical of ‘the vagaries of the market where profit rules and private players respond accordingly.

This anxiety can also be seen in Rohan D’Souza’s reflections on the state of higher education in India. In recent times, the growing attack on leading public universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in the name of hyper-nationalist sentiments, and the simultaneous rise of profit-oriented private universities, or the steady growth of ed-tech companies seem to have altered the very notion of studentship. Far from being a politically and culturally sensitive citizen filled with the democratic spirit, a student, as D’Souza worries, is fast becoming a consumer. The loss of the ‘Humboldtian ideal’, or the rise of the ‘corporate university’, as D’Souza argues with a wonderful mix of scholarship and political sensibilities, is something to be worried about. Likewise, as the pandemic gave some kind of legitimacy to ‘online education’, Debaditya Bhattacharya’s critical reflections on ‘Digital Capital and the Indian University’ become immensely relevant. In fact, the ‘digital evangelism’ within higher education as Bhattacharya worries, might cause a ‘major outsourcing of teaching labour leading to a near total disappearance of the idea of tenured or permanent employment’. Furthermore, awakened studentship is also about the cultivation of the art of resistance against the instrumental logic of domination for creating a just and humane society. This requires solidarity—an experience of connectivity. But then, Bhattacharya reminds us that online classrooms are simply incapable of building such ‘commons’.

This volume, it can be said, is about serious introspection and critical reflection. For instance, Saumen Chattopadhyay’s essay on the construction of a state-

regulated market for higher education reform is quite subtle. Well, it is possible to say that NEP 2020, instead of approving of utter commercialization of education, pleads for ‘responsible private sector participation funded by philanthropy’. However, what cannot be denied is that it is, as Chattopadhyay reveals through a fairly enriched analysis, ‘largely in tune with the neoliberal vision’. Likewise, Geetha Nambissan’s sociologically enriched enquiry into the rise of ‘low cost’ schooling for the poor in India enables us to reflect on the systematic neglect of publicly funded education by the state. Likewise, Nambissan reminds us of the failure on the part of the state to ensure that ‘teacher education programmes equip teachers with a critical perspective and an understanding of pedagogies that can address poverty and social disadvantage within a rights and social justice framework.’

Amid these tales of discontents of the state of education in India, a positive story appears as a refreshing departure. Yes, L.R.S. Lakshmi has argued that not everything is bad about Muslims of the Lakshadweep islands. Let me quote her:

How education from its humble beginnings in mosque schools to government schools reached its peak in Lakshadweep in the twenty- first century might not be general knowledge, but for a modern social historian, it is an important historical event. The islands being fully literate is a major achievement by the islanders in the Indian context. Belonging to a special category of Scheduled Tribes, they have been given full government support in their educational endeavours. The close affinity of the island Muslims with Kerala Mapillas is reflected in their achievement of the country’s highest literacy rates.

My engagement with this book will remain incomplete unless I express my gratitude to Anthony Joseph for his essay—an essay that arouses hope because it celebrates the role of ‘reflexive teacher- educators’, who as it is argued, can draw their inspiration from the likes of William Blake, John Ruskin and David Thoreau, and draw their ‘potentially heretical views’. At a time when we are seeing the triumph of the market-driven ‘corporate agenda’ that ‘dismantles

liberal and progressive education’, Joseph acquires the courage to cherish the pedagogy of hope. Yes, as Joseph argues, reflexive teachers or educators can question the ‘global free market determinism’, and make us realize that ‘only an education system based on liberal democratic principles can offer the possibility of a genuinely free society.’

Possibly, this otherwise relevant and insightful book would have acquired yet another dimension had it contained a couple of essays in tune with what Anthony Joseph pleaded for—the role of reflexive teachers in our classrooms in these dark and toxic times.

Amrita Sastry, *Jesus and Mary College of the University of Delhi, New Delhi, India*

As we embark into the new journey of educational reforms with the implementation of NEP 2020, one can see a certain level of ambivalence surrounding its paradoxes and possibilities. At this juncture, Maya John’s edited volume comprising of eleven essays is a great reflection on highlighting how education becomes an important component in structuring the structure, and hence remains a debatable topic in contemporary times. This rich body of work is not limited to one discipline, rather its unique blend of multidisciplinary keeps the reader critically engaged. The introductory chapter by Dr. Maya John, traces the idea of education historically looking at the issue of accessibility to equality through the story of Eklavya. This story from the epic Mahabharata reminds us about the cynicism of the education system and the existence of socially disabling factor reproducing inequality. She navigates through a plethora of thinkers and highlights on the idea of enlightenment in the development of critical thinking. Her remarks on trends in higher education and

the online teaching learning process clearly opens the readers mind with a lot of self- reflective questions in the neo-liberal period.

Chapter one by Kumkum Roy, evokes a mixed feeling about the NEP 2020. She advocates the idea that a fixed understanding of Sanskrit knowledge System gives a little scope to understand rich cultural history of India. Her endeavour to understand the document critically, draws the readers attention to the inherent contradictions creating a bi-polar vision. The detailed quotes from the draft documents acts as an eyeopener towards the skewed vision of the policy.

Certainly, while looking at the rich cultural history of India one cannot deny the importance of Sanskrit as a language form, but to reduce it as the single category is moving away from the core constitutional values.

The second chapter by Geetha Nambisan, is a reality check on ‘Low- cost’ schooling in the Indian context. ‘Affordable Learning’ (AL) paving the way for low-cost private schools has started from early 2000s, and James Tooley’s work is remarkable in this field. Ironically in the Indian context these unrecognized/unregulated private schools have become an illegal business.

While one can see with the growing middle-class aspirations, the burgeoning of the private schools remains a dream for the lower class. This idea of AL model with UPS, has created a nexus worldwide by creating poor standards of teaching. This chapter reflects upon the role of government responsibility towards the society, and how government school decline is creating a big business opportunity. This commodification of education is increasing further marginalization and the larger purpose of education is lost. Moreover, this chapter enables the reader to think, where we have failed as teachers, teacher-educators, as government, and are we really equipped to understand the various intersections of the society which was created during Covid-19.

Jyoti Raina’s chapter on policy shifts is a critical detailing of various policies beginning from Post-Independent Years. She divided her analysis into three

phases starting with the policy wisdom of Post-Independent India, Nehruvian idea of egalitarianism, and the Kothari Commission report on *Education and National Development*, the 10+2+3 model, to the NEP 1986 and 1992. Her focus is on the Phase III which began post 2016, as a distinct one since here hierarchies in schooling has been largely seen as normal. She claims this phase constitutes ‘non-linear policy cycle’ aligning with the transnational advocacy networks. This phase of neo-liberalism which is also reflected on the draft Nep 2020 neglects the basic barriers in the path development for all.

The fourth chapter by Anthony Joseph, is a reflexive perspective which highlights on the idea of teacher education under NEP 2020 with a vision of creating a ‘New’ India. The idea of having reflexive pedagogy creates a new hope amidst despair. It creates a radical path for the teacher- educator, termed as ‘heretics’ by Joseph, but without this thinking the real meaning of education will be lost. His reflection upon the contemporary educational practices with specific reference to the NEP 2020, and his urge to the readers to develop reflexive thinking is certainly inviting teachers to take the moral responsibilities in shaping a new India and to look for meaningful alternative possibilities.

The chapter by L.R.S. Lakshmi, is an exhaustive case study, which examined the cases of Muslims of the Lakshadweep. The case study traces the journey of educational reforms in the island from the colonial to the Post-Independence Period as well as the close affinity with Kerala on the education system. She highlights on positive intervention made by the central government which enabled the island to be achieve the highest literacy rate.

The sixth chapter by Madhu Prasad, reflects on the discriminatory, oppressive, and exclusionary practices in the Indian society. The caste system, colonial subjugation and struggle for independence intersects and paves the way for egalitarian and democratic struggle. The essay navigates through the egalitarian aspirations of earlier educational policy and looks at the shift in NEP 2020. She

embarks upon a critical analysis of NEP 2020, which betrayed the egalitarian ethos and right to education as a fundamental right.

Mohd. Bilal's essay highlighted about the 'educational apartheid' as an outcome post-colonial policy. The classic indicators of skewed admission policies in higher education institutions clearly points out towards the irony of exclusion. Bilal reasserts the idea in his essay that the system is hierarchized before the neo-liberal era, and this is normalizing inequality which is evident in the NEP 2020. This overpowering structure of inequality is acting as a social fact leading to the creation of labour class for the neo-liberal economy.

The subsequent four chapters by Saumen Chattopadhyaya, Debaditya Bhattacharya Rohan D'Souza and Maya John have a critical perspective towards NEP 2020, with specific reference to higher education. Impact of NEP 2020, is evident with its implementation aspect in one of the premier university of India in the academic session 2022-23. Saumen took a closer look at the policy shift in higher education. The concept of efficiencies is critiqued from two perspective; first one to focus on university governance, and second being the construction of quasi-market to operate under the supervision of a regulatory authority. His essay critically looks at the various indicators of NEP 2020, beginning with Institutional structure, Student's sovereignty, Academic Bank Credit (ABC), Online education, and the market economy around that, the role of leadership, autonomy and many more. While critically looking at these aspects, he proposed, increase in public funding, which will act as a 'level playing field' for HEIs before they die their own death or re-create their new path.

While Debaditya Bhattacharya, in his essay looks at the idea of 'Blending' the futures of higher education. His idea of 'blend' takes us back to the time of pandemic and push towards the online teaching learning process. However, the blend does not end with the pandemic, it continues and this is evident in the

creation of cluster units under NEP 2020. His essay becomes an important reflection of contemporary times where he questions the idea of '*Who are the surplus peoples?*' The interesting digital shift which alters the idea of university is by reducing classroom as a muted space- the chronic zone of connectivity failure. He also emphasizes upon the multidisciplinary, aspect of NEP 2020 which clearly depicts the dilemma of disciplines like social sciences.

Rohan D'Souza's chapter cautions the reader and reflects on the shift from public funded university system to private university. He looks at the trajectory of higher education in Independent India, the shift from government funded university to private funded ones and the loss of government control, the increase in educational loans, and the systematic marginalization of humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences. The new culture of academia, 'publish or perish', the mushrooming of predatory journals, the idea of branding, the race towards validation etc reflects upon the death of university as a public sphere. The mushrooming of Ed-tech- the cheaper higher education, creates robot and takes us away from critical engagement. His essay is meaningful in contemporary scenario, as the mission of higher education is going to see its degradation soon.

The final essay in this volume, by Maya John, has a critical perspective and highlights on the inherent contradiction in the NEP 2020. She asserts on the pre-colonial duality and the prevalence of hierarchy in education system, and how it continues even today. The 'new' policy certainly has strengthened the hold of the privileged sections in the society. The crucial point of concern about NEP 2020, analysed by John is the idea of graded autonomy, multiple exit options, vanishing public funds paving the way for privatization and creation of Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA). She also looked at the critical intersection of caste, class, and its impact on education during Covid-19.

Overall, this volume is a rich and gives the reader a nuanced understanding of NEP 2022. It tries to create an academic space for critical engagement amongst the educationist, the learners, the policy makers and reflect upon the idea of education. Almost all the essays comprehensively evaluate the policy and how it has failed in various parameters. However, it fails to look at the possibilities of NEP 2020 at any point of time and how these possibilities can create an alternative model.

Mandvi Mishra, *University of Delhi, Delhi, India*

The book, *Debating Education in India* opens with a claim that it is a testimony of its times. A thorough reading would tell the reader that it is more than that. An enriching introduction by Maya John sets the tone and lays the context for the eleven chapters that follow, bringing to the fore a larger picture in terms of historical and philosophical reflections on the domain of education. Engaging with these reflections, it also underlines the existence of a tension in the discourse on the question of the purpose of education. The opening remarks propel the reader to reflect: Is education merely an enlightening force, and does it serve as the medium to access power, posts, and position in society? Throughout the book, the various authors engage with the politics of knowledge within the continuum of educational ‘reforms’, locating crucial questions like who has access to education, what do people want from education, and whose purpose does education serve.

John navigates through the intellectual legacies from the eighteenth century onward to locate the dual nature of education as both an emancipatory and reproductionist force. Either way, access to the institutionalized forms of education were laden with the aspirational value for the poor aiming for social mobility. However, for the ruling elites, hegemony over knowledge acted as a

tool for reproducing inequalities and maintaining their dominance in society. It is important to mention how the introduction acquaints the reader with the historical trends and philosophical traditions to etch out the prelude to a more informed deliberation on education of our times. The introduction establishes how diverse knowledge systems are ignored and how elite norms and narratives become dominant. Challenging the current knowledge systems, the book envisages a restructuring of the education system that expands access to the marginalized, not just for the sake of upwards mobility, but for facilitating critical knowledge to make them “part and partners of what knowledge does to them and the larger society”.

The book brings together authors from a range of disciplines, who employ diverse methods and lens to examine the making of the present educational conjuncture in India. The book remarkably brings different oppositional voices together in one volume, and expectedly there remains a dialogic tension between them. For instance, there is Madhu Prasad who stresses on the contributions of different nationalist leaders in bringing some form of egalitarian hope. She claims that the paradise has only recently been lost, whereas Mohd. Bilal’s contribution in an emphatic manner shows, what he calls the ‘Longue Duree’ of educational apartheid, within which, both, the mainstream left and Dalit-Bahujan interventions were also complicit. The chapter by Bilal is lucid and apt in pointing out the hierarchical nature in which education in India has evolved to reproduce the labour force for a highly segmented job-market since the colonial and early post-colonial times.

Resonating with Madhu Prasad’s argument is the chapter by Jyoti Raina, who highlights a continuity of a gap between the “principle” and “practice”, and yet maintains an empathetic gaze at the policymakers of young independent India and their ‘egalitarian and inclusive’ visions. The shared consensus of authors like Prasad and Raina can be questioned, considering that education is part of

Article 45 of the Directive Principle of State Policy which is the non-justiciable component of the Indian Constitution. Education was not made a Fundamental Right. This fact interestingly finds mention in Bilal's chapter where he deems this the "lip service to the aspirations of the masses" and calls for rigorous interrogation of the early post-colonial state's education policies.

While Raina's chapter may seem uncritical of the early post-colonial state, her work does nevertheless point to the corrosion of public-funded education not as a recent decay but as a gradual shift through subsequent policy phases. She highlights the gradual shift towards privatization and further fortification of the binary of public and private school education systems, and the increased graded hierarchization within both of them. Herein, the chapter focuses on three major policy shifts in school education (1968, 1986, and 2020), which have led up to the present-day National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 framework.

The recent intensification of neoliberalisation and privatisation of education highlighted by Raina has led to further weakening of public-funded educational structure. This has led to a sizeable population exiting government schools and joining low-cost private schools. An elaborate study of this phenomenon of low-cost private schools is provided by Geetha Nambissan in her chapter.

Nambissan locates the emergence of market-oriented solutions to the growing demand for affordable good quality education. These solutions typically manifest themselves in the form of low-cost private schools, digitization, and technology-driven 'reforms'. Such market-oriented solutions have resulted in rampant privatization, de-professionalisation, deskilling, and exploitation of teachers, as well as exclusion of majority of students due to the digital divide and policy shift from public-funded education to public-private partnerships. The chapter is a close examination of the increased nexus of private players and withdrawal of the state through cost-cutting measures like digitization in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and promotion of online learning by NEP

2020. Interestingly, to gloss over the reality, both chapters by Nambissan and Raina bring forth how a new vocabulary like “philanthropic” in place of private is used to camouflage the rampant entry of private players in the education market.

Education was always linked to the aspirational value and it is because of the further decay of the government school system, the lower orders of society are also forced to shift to the private education system. The process is so long drawn that the neoliberal shift in education policy does not appear so disturbing and problematic for common people. Several extant scholars tend to overlook this decay at the level of schooling as their dominance in the cultural world is derived from their past access to private schooling; creating a classic case of epistemological hindrance. However, in this volume scholars like Nambissan, Bilal, Raina and John bring out the largely forgotten conversation around commercialization of school education to the forefront.

What surfaces in Madhu Prasad’s writing as NEP’s obsession with the ancient ‘mythical’ past, is further developed by Kumkum Roy in her chapter. Roy’s reading of the NEP succinctly contests the claim of the hierarchical ‘Vishwa Guru Model’ as NEP endeavours to sideline constitutional values, omit the contributions of the sub-continent’s medieval history, and seeks to overshadow “the knowledge and skills developed, transmitted, and possessed by the ‘non-literate’ people”.

Anthony Joseph’s chapter emphasizes the role of reflexive teachers as “academic heretics” to fuel the creative and critical capacities of the learner. The politically prescribed curricula are being used to deploy an educational apparatus that weaponizes knowledge, promotes “a corporate agenda that privileges the consumer and not citizens,” and discredits and dismantles any trace of progressive critical education. Joseph talks about the role of a reflexive teacher wherein a teacher is not simply a conduit of the current syllabi but a co-

interrogator of the world around him along with the pupil. The chapter brings out a general liberal angst about the role of a teacher without seeing the larger changing scenario within which the teaching learning happens. What is missing as an important context in Joseph's writing surfaces in Saumen Chattopadhyay's chapter. It is in his chapter that the changing role of a teacher and corresponding fate of the teaching learning process is located within the emergent realities of the present neo-liberal phase.

Chattopadhyay's chapter also adds to the close examination of NEP 2020, which is a running theme throughout the book. While pointing at the conflicting nature of the vision envisaged by the NEP 2020 for higher education institutes (HEIs) in India. The chapter falls short in delving into the game plan of the ruling dispensation in furthering existing disparities between HEIs. Moreover, destroying the autonomy of HEIs in the bid of snuff out any resistance to the regime's endeavour to completely subjugate the knowledge world. This concern, however, is forcefully brought up in the chapter by Rohan D'Souza, who signals a larger game plan of dismantling the public-funded university system through the case of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He adequately highlights the changing role of university spaces in producing consumer-customers, instead of critical political citizens through the systemic marginalization of traditional humanities and liberal arts. The chapter points towards a marked rise of corporate universities with student loans and debts, digitalization of education, and conversion of students into "users".

Sharing the same dystopian anxiety is Debaditya Bhattacharya's chapter, which highlights the wave of informalisation, privatisation, and digitisation of education post-pandemic. He also talks about the pervasive silence that the NEP 2020 maintains on the question of affirmative action as mass access to higher education and how it is envisaged through promotion of informal online education. The appended emphasis on multidisciplinary curriculum (instead of

interdisciplinarity) aims at preparing merely a multi-skilled labour force for the global market without any creative critical engagement. It is at this point that one can revisit John's introduction where she engages with the sociological theories of scholars like Durkheim, Parsons, and Luhmann to uncover the theoretical grounds informing the neoliberal changes discussed in the aforementioned chapters. There is an operative logic to these changes, i.e., "to strengthen differential valuation of given hierarchies of skill and profession", and the "dismissal of ameliorative tendencies of education to reinforce inherited educational and social inequalities." John argues that this functionalist perspective serves as a justification for the new skill-oriented approach to education through market-driven neoliberal models and the gradual withdrawal of the state.

A unique case that emphasises the role of public-funded education in overcoming educational backwardness among the marginalized communities is highlighted in the chapter by L.R.S. Laskshmi. The study by L.R.S. Lakshmi of the Muslims of the Lakshadweep Islands reveals how affirmative action through quality government schools has proved to be an intervention that has turned Lakshadweep into one of the most literate areas in the country. The classification of Muslims of Lakshadweep Islands as a Schedule Tribe provided them with ample policy attention, which most of the people from the Muslim community have been lacking in other parts of the country. The chapter serves empirical evidence of how consistent state investment, combined with a supporting policy framework, serves the purpose of accessible and inclusive education. Unfortunately, many of these gains are soon to be lost under the new policy regime.

The final chapter by Maya John serves as a holistic analysis of NEP 2020 and its failure to address the requirements of higher education in India. The NEP serves as a hierarchization of educational institutions, along with the

redesigning of the existing curriculum and pedagogy so as to erroneously assert that India harbours a monolithic, unchanging, singular, homogenous culture. The chapter, in line with the chapter by Roy, brings forth the overt focus on Sanskrit knowledge systems of the ‘glorious’ past which was ingrained with caste, class, and gender hierarchies. John’s writing while being critical of the new policy shifts like the establishment of the Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) loans, push towards graded autonomy of HEIs and institutional restructuring, enmasse promotion of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), introduction of the academic bank of credits, and so on, nevertheless remains thoroughly cognizant of the pre-existing system of hierarchy and segmentation that maintained and reproduced class and caste-based social exclusion since independence.

The book’s use of lucid language and tone is commendable, as it enhances the accessibility of the content and facilitates a deeper engagement with the material. The straightforward language allows for a more inclusive reading experience, making the complex ideas more approachable for a wider audience. It offers a diverse range of perspectives cutting across various disciplines, addressing issues that resonate with international debates during the era of the so-called neoliberal shift. Despite diverse approaches and understanding, when it comes to reflections on the New Education Policy (NEP), 2020 the different authors converge together to launch a formidable critique of the prevailing policy ecosystem. The volume strives to highlight the crucial fault lines of contemporary educational policy in India and the long trajectory of educational inequalities, making it a valuable and thought-provoking resource for understanding the complexities of the Indian education system. One has to mention the cover of the book (image credited to Mohd. Shahnawaz), which perfectly encapsulates the essence of the book and its vision.

The reason the book stands out in the pool of existing literature on education in India is that the book does not limit its focus to the crevices in the crippling educational infrastructure, but also investigates the material, philosophical and ideological configuration within which the education system is embedded. The book locates issues and debates in education in India through their bearing on equity, quality, and access. With the commitment to unravelling the creation of what is identified in the book's introduction as "Modern Eklavyas," the work of each of the authors explore the educational divide across cardinal axes like caste, class, gender, region, and religion.

The book looks at the educational apparatus from the eye of the last person standing in line for access to quality public-funded education. This makes the text a seminal reading to understand the making of the present historical juncture which stands at the intersection of the new neoliberal reforms, the colonial and post-colonial past ladened with vested interests of the ruling elites, and the skewed politics of knowledge.

Reviewer Details

Avijit Pathak Ph.D. is a Professor of Sociology and taught at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India for more than three decades. Contact details.

avijitpaathak@gmail.com

Amrita Sastry Ph.D. is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Jesus and Mary College of the University of Delhi, New Delhi, India. Contact details.

asastry@jmc.du.ac.in

Mandvi Mishra is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Delhi, Delhi, India and a Social Activist. Contact details.

mandvimishra.262@gmail.com