

# NEP 2020 through Muslim prism

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*This article presents a Muslim Community perspective on the New Education Policy 2020. The author says the big worry is the status of Muslim 'madrassas'. There is not a single word on it in the 62-page policy document. When early childhood education in Ashrams and Ashram-shalas can be addressed, why have madrassas been given short-shrift? Arabic is not included in the list of foreign languages which would be offered from senior secondary level. Arabic is the language of the countries where most NRIs live.*

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The recently launched New Education Policy (NEP 2020) is all set to pave the way for a new education system in the country. It is incumbent for us to study this policy statement because of its inherent importance and far-reaching implications.

Our first Education Minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, pioneered the concepts of 'education for all' and 'education for social change'.

However, a formal education policy was only announced for the first time in 1968, nearly 20 years later.

A new education policy was next launched in 1986 by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Nearly 34 years later after a massive data and opinion gathering exercise and three draft versions, finally the NEP 2020 has been formally approved by the Cabinet and brought out for implementation and in the public domain. We should look at the NEP 2020 with a critical eye as well as appreciate its 'positives'.

The policy is very ambitious in tone as it aims at making India a 'knowledge superpower'. This will only be possible if all the citizens of this country along with the principal stakeholders like students, parents, teachers, and educational institutions including its administrators, management, and the government unite and work in unison towards implementing the NEP. Social groups and minorities shall be impacted by the NEP and must be prepared for meeting its challenges. Minorities are a social reality that has been recognized by our Constitution. The Muslim community makes for a major chunk of that minority-pie.

When we look at the NEP 2020 from the prism of the Muslim community, there are many 'positives', various 'misses', and some issues that are a cause of concern. We must also study the policy as responsible citizens and seek ways of engagement with the government and authorities in coordination with other minorities and classes such as the Dalits and OBCs. If there are certain 'misses' in it, then they should be identified proactively and suitable suggestions should be presented before the government. One of the concerns regarding NEP 2020 is its non-inclusive approach. It confines itself for seeking inspiration through the institutions of higher learning only from Ancient India. Educational institutions that flourished in Medieval India seem to have been skipped altogether. The system of 'madrassas' established by Muslims during the Medieval period was lauded by Lord Macaulay for imparting both religious as well as secular subjects such as 'tibb' (medicine) and 'riyazi' (mathematics).

This deliberate omission of significant portions of history is a reflection of the subtle bias in the mindset of those who designed the NEP. For them, the history of India after the arrival of Muslim and British rulers is stained and devoid of anything worthwhile. There is no mention of the glorious progress made by post-Independence India in the field of education. The contribution of Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Banaras Hindu University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University is missing.

The second concern is the near absence of the word 'minorities' in the entire document. To be specific, it has been mentioned only once in the NEP 2020 (Section 6.2.4) among its otherwise generous usage of various terms and buzzwords that form the 'lingo' of modern education literature and deliberations. According to the Sachar Report, the Gross Enrolment Ratio for Muslims in higher education is only 4.4%. If the NEP wants to lift this ratio from the present all-India level from 26% to 50%, then it cannot afford to ignore Muslims who make the biggest minority of India that constitutes nearly 14% of the population. The NEP talks of adopting creativity, rational thinking, and a holistic approach. It appears paradoxical in a political climate that crushes dissent, hates probing questions, and promotes majoritarianism. Minorities are also worried about the policy's silence on the rights of minority educational institutions enshrined in Article 30 of the Constitution. The NEP encourages sensitizing students and teachers to respect diversity, whereas the polity is being driven on the path of one nation-one national language or one nation-one culture.

The third concern is regarding the overarching tilt of the NEP towards centralization of the education system that will weaken our federal polity as a natural consequence. It will also affect minorities and minority educational institutions. In India, different states have different policies regarding reservation of seats during admissions and other sops offered to education for minorities. It is not clear how the NEP 2020 will change things and Muslims have justified apprehensions based on the track record of the centre towards minorities. There is anxiety over the allocation of funds, maintenance of

educational standards, the amalgamation of weaker institutions into some other entity, the location and accessibility of the proposed new education complexes.

**Another big worry is the status of Muslim madrassas. There is not a single word on it in the 62-page policy document. When early childhood education in Ashrams and Ashram-shalas can be addressed, why have madrassas been given short shrift? Arabic is not included in the list of foreign languages which would be offered from senior secondary level. Arabic is the language of the countries where most NRIs live. We have cultural, business and strategic relations with Arabic speaking countries. The NEP 2020 talks of the role of philanthropy for funding educational institutions and education volunteers to raise the standard of education. If funding flows through the corporate CSR route, it will lead to apprehensions of misuse and commercialization of education. There is no valve to regulate the ideological bias of education volunteers and may harm our pluralistic, syncretic, and multi-cultural ethos. The compulsory skill development module introduced in higher secondary classes raises fears of augmenting the dropout rate as the poor and needy students, especially minorities may seek employment with the vocational knowledge imparted by forgoing their dreams of gaining higher professional education.**

What is the task before Muslims vis-à-vis the NEP 2020? One is a clinical examination of the document and debating the various challenges and opportunities it presents for the community. Utilizing the services of educational experts, Muslims should engage with the government over their concerns and apprehensions with a positive attitude. Muslims must present their recommendations on various issues like curriculum framing, funding, and pedagogy. The Muslim community must prepare 'vidya' volunteers on a large scale to interact with Muslim-managed schools and colleges at the minimum, who will try to improve the standard of education by utilizing the latest management tools available. The interaction with the government should be in coordination with other minorities especially the Christian community. The government must be asked why the NEP was silent on the issues of reservation for minorities and Muslim madrassas. Will the much-touted top-100 global universities that will have campuses in India conform to affirmative action for minorities and socially and economically deprived sections of India? Can the goal of social justice be achieved without it? Muslims must now shift their focus from the physical infrastructure of institutions to the soft power of the educational institutions, namely the teachers and their teaching skills. Train the trainer programs should be organized by the community on a permanent and continual basis. The NEP 2020 is a double-edged sword for the Muslim community. They must develop the tenacity to utilize it. Obviously, their future is at stake.

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