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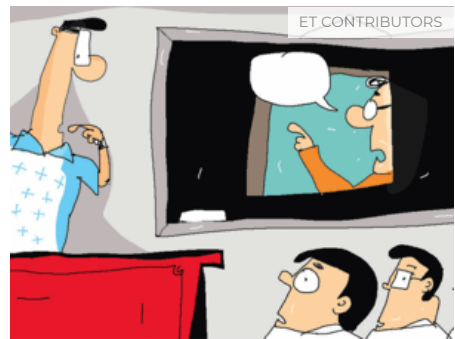
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# Near total enrollment, improved infra; So what's the problem with our education system?

**Synopsis**  
You only need a diploma in education (Class 12 plus a two-year DEd course) and pass the government's Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) to teach Classes 1 to 8.



The Puranas say it took the gods and demons a thousand years, with some help from Vishnu who took on the form of a tortoise, to churn the Milky Ocean before it yielded the divine nectar (amrit). The samudra manthan also produced a deadly poison, halahala, which Shiva obligingly consumed.

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The churning of India's [education system](#), thankfully, is not taking an eternity. Over the past 70 years, it has yielded more poison than nectar. But it

**SECTIONS** Near total enrollment, improved infra; So what's the problem with our education system?

[National Education Policy](#) (NEP) for the past three years. In January 2015, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) launched an “unprecedented collaborative, multi-stakeholder and multi-pronged

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consultation process” covering 33 themes across the country. In October 2015, it appointed a committee headed by former Cabinet Secretary TSR Subramanian to draft an NEP.

Four months later its name was mysteriously changed to a “Committee for Evolution of the NEP”.

The Subramanian committee submitted its report in May 2016, with about 95 recommendations. It was never published. Instead, the MHRD issued a report titled ‘Some Inputs for Draft NEP 2016’. Then, nothing much happened until June this year, when a [new](#) committee headed by Dr K Kasturirangan, former chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation, was set up. The government has promised that the Kasturirangan report will be out by December.

There has been no shortage of good intent, and slicing and dicing, and commissions galore, since Independence. However, the first National Policy on Education (NPE) for a ‘radical reconstruction’ of the education system was issued in 1968 by the then Indira Gandhi government. In 1986, the then [Rajiv Gandhi](#) government issued a second NPE (this was revised under the PV Narasimha Rao government in 1992) that for the first time aspired to a universalisation of education and pledged at least an elementary school within one kilometre of every habitation in the country.

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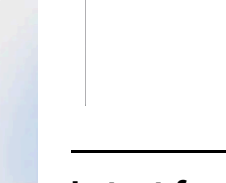


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The [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#) government enacted the Constitution (86th Amendment) which inserted Article 21A, making free education for all children aged six to 14 a fundamental right. The UPA's Right to Education Act of 2009 was constructed on this foundation.

The government schooling system expanded massively in the 1990s and the first decade of this century. From about 55 per cent enrolment in 1987, we now have achieved near-total enrolment. "We have near-gender parity," says Anurag Behar, CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation, adding that schools have also broken most caste and religious barriers. Infrastructure has also improved. What then is the problem? Most public funding went into school infrastructure, leaving teacher education to the private sector. We often hear that our education crisis is because our children, especially in elementary schools (grades 1-8) lag in literacy and numeracy. But the real crisis, as I said in my last column, is in the quality of our [teachers](#). Teacher education institutions (TEIs) have mushroomed across the country; 90 per cent of them are privately-run.

I spoke with two senior MHRD officials, neither of whom was willing to be identified by name. One told me: "The true problem is the teacher. In pre-service training we have the biggest education mafia in the country...It is a racket of the highest order." As I mentioned in my last column, India has nearly 4.7 million government school teachers.

In January 2009, the Bombay High Court struck down the indiscriminate licensing of 291 Diploma in Education (DEd) colleges by the Maharashtra branch of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). The Supreme Court, hearing a challenge to this order, set up a committee headed by former Chief Justice of India JS Verma to examine the issue of teacher training. The Verma panel made 30 recommendations. It took nearly five years for action to start. The second MHRD official estimates that about 40 per cent of the

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current 18,000 TEIs were set up in those five years. To put this in context, there were about 1,300 TEIs in the late 1960s, rising to about 1,550 in the mid-1990s. Then there was an explosion. If you were a small-town politician or businessman you could buy a licence to start a teacher-training bucket shop. "With the teacher-education scam we have pushed out the future of this country by 50 to 70 years," Behar says.

"Our entire metric was around land, building and faculty. If you could show these, you got a licence from the NCTE," the second MHRD official said. In October 2016, the MHRD ordered all TEIs to file affidavits that would confirm their existence. About 6,000 failed to do so. They were issued show-cause notices. While the stand-off continues, the NCTE has called a halt to granting recognition to any new TEIs.

Affidavits by themselves are band-aids. "No inadequacy is fatal," the second MHRD official said. If you don't have land, buy land. If you don't have faculty, hire a few people. "The regulator is like a [dog](#) trying to catch its own tail. Just as you reach the tail, it vanishes." So the NCTE designed a new accreditation system around learning outcomes by testing students. It said it would videograph all the 1.5 lakh teachers in the TEIs, starting with a one-hour video interview of the teachers.

In June, NCTE launched a framework plan, dubbed TeachR, setting out these new norms. It said by April 2018 all TEIs would have to be accredited; it also plans a ranking of the top 100 TEIs. This set off a firestorm of protest: as of last week, a total of 238 cases have been filed by TEIs against the NCTE in 13 high courts and the Supreme Court. So far three stay orders have been issued. In early November, the Supreme Court will hear a contempt case it transferred suo motu to itself from the Patna HC .

Teachers in elementary or secondary schools have to possess one of 15 different degrees or diplomas, all of them regulated by the NCTE, which has now turned enforcer. The trouble is the vast majority of them have studied in fly-by-night colleges, the second MHRD official told me. "This is a slow-moving cancer. We keep surveying students who cannot learn. Do we survey teachers who cannot teach?"

You only need a diploma in education (Class 12 plus a two-year DEd course) and pass the government's Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) to teach Classes 1 to 8. Only 12 per cent of candidates taking the TET pass the examination. And you need a bachelor's in education (Class 12 plus a three-year undergraduate degree plus an 18-month BEd) to teach secondary school subjects. Oddly, the TET is not used to screen either kindergarten or secondary teachers in government schools.

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Behar told me there are two problems: pathetic governance and regulation, and very poor envisioning of teacher preparation. He said he was a member of one committee set up to implement the Justice Verma recommendations. "But this requires guts," he said. "You will have to shut down many TEIs. Who will shut them down? Nothing happened until (HRD Minister Prakash) Javadekar came on the scene, as well as Anil Swarup (Secretary of School Education and Literacy) and Santhosh Mathew (current NCTE chairman). For the first time somebody is taking this up. Unless you fix this mess, our schools won't improve. Otherwise it's like prescribing Crocin for cancer."

Teaching younger children is always more challenging than teaching older children. Our teachers need to learn soft skills, not just how to teach from a rigid curriculum. Children need to be mentored and to be encouraged to inquire and innovate. Behar notes that contrary to popular perception, most private schools pay their teachers far less than government schools. Across India, government schools far outnumber private ones, so salaries are not an issue. Once the shakeout in the bucket shops is completed, we will have to set up good TEIs in sufficient numbers.

The TSR Subramanian committee report did not mince its words about teacher management issues. "These include teacher shortages, absenteeism, corruption in recruitment and transfers and absence of an effective machinery to redress their genuine grievances," it said. "A large number of government schools do not have full-time headmasters/principals. The lack of effective leadership has contributed to indiscipline among teachers leading to declining academic standards."

We can only wait in hope for the Kasturirangan Committee to lay out the first NEP in a quarter-century. Meanwhile, there are some good stories to tell. I will share a couple with you in a subsequent column.

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