



NEWSLETTER-6

January-2021

Editorial Communication

Dear comrades, friends and well-wishers,

Even as I sit writing this, thousands of farmers, men and women, keep their vigil on the borders of Delhi for another long cold night. They wait patiently for a sunrise of victory over the fascistic rulers of this country who are seeking to steal away through force and fraud their right to the soil which they till and to the crops with which they feed the people. Support for them is rising every day and they are setting an example to the nation. It is our task to carry their message to the remote corners of the states where there still may be lack of awareness that these farmers are fighting for all of us.

To do this work we have also to keep in mind our predecessors in the women's movement who had been ceaseless campaigners even in the pre-Independence years for the democratic rights of the people as also for the rights of women. Kanak Mukhopadhyay, whose birth centenary we are celebrating this year was such a leader and also a founder of our beloved organisation. In these dark times, when young people's rights of choosing a life partner are facing an obnoxious challenge from cooked-up myths of 'love jihad' and unconstitutional anti-conversion laws, we are reminded of the days when marriages of choice were in danger of being subverted by the atrocious 'dowry system' and the battle for an anti-dowry law had started. The following translated excerpt from Kanak-di's article 'Love Marriage and the Dowry System' which she wrote in 1960 may well commemorate our pathfinders' keen commitment to the social necessity of the right of choice especially for young women.

'Marriage of choice among young adults may act as the surest antidote to the evil of dowry. Young educated men and women rejecting the dowry system from the conviction of their hearts alone can strike at its very roots [within society]. To

eradicate the evil, is it not more important to convince young people living in the sunshine of a new era than to try to persuade the elders in the family with their hide-bound self-centred approach? Propagation of awareness among the latter need not be neglected, but to my mind the greater share of responsibility lies with the younger generation, those preparing to get married themselves.

Yet at most anti-dowry gatherings that I have attended it is the opinions of family elders that tend to be generally highlighted. At how many such congregations have we seen young men coming up in thousands to take a pledge against dowry or young women asserting that they would not be sold in marriage for cash? Where do we find such resolution? Parents surely have some share of responsibility in the bringing up of children, but they cannot be blamed for [all] the weaknesses of their young.

My appeal then is essentially to young people contemplating marriage. Of course our demand to parents is that they give their sons and daughters equal education, equal opportunities so that parity may have a chance. But it is on the young people—women as well as men—that we rely for the major initiative towards marriages of choice where the exchange of dowry shall have no space.

We have made some progress towards equal rights for men and women; some easing of social inhibitions has taken place. We only hope that better education and awareness will enable our youth to take a leading role in solving the festering problems of our age-old marriage system. Let the marriage of choice bring the joy of freedom to our lives. Let the equal rights of men and women find a secure footing in conjugal and family life. This must be our ultimate goal in the on-going struggle against the dowry system’.

Kanak Mukhopadhyay (1960)

Let us hope to carry the fire of this inspiration into the bleak New Year!

From Malini Bhattacharya and the editorial team which now consists of the following:

Mariam Dhawale, Sudha Sundaraman, Kirti Singh, Archana Prasad, Manjeet Rathee, Sandhya Shaily, Madhu Garg, Surangya (Setting and designing).

Tyrant Modi, Withdraw Unjust Agricultural Acts!
by Mariam Dhawale

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Tyrant Modi, Withdraw Unjust Agricultural Acts!

-Mariam Dhawale, General Secretary, AIDWA



Mangal Ghadge (right) and Mirabai Lange (middle) of Nashik district have forged a friendship while participating in farmers' protests over the years. They also marched together from Nashik to Delhi. Photo: People's Archive of Rural India

Women farmers – these two words are rarely paid attention to. Stories of how women farmers, especially widows, deserted and single women are coping with the agricultural crisis which has intensified during the pandemic are extremely painful.

Bharti is trying to keep her family alive by scrounging for edible roots in the forests. Kamla has got buried in a mountain of debt which she has taken from MFIs and others to keep the home fires burning. Sangeeta does not get any subsidized fertilizers as the land is not in her name. Giriji is daily threatened by forest officials of being ousted from the small forest plot that she survives on. This list is unending.

Women wake up in the wee hours of dawn, work tirelessly in the fields, manage all the household chores and own nothing. Women are never recognised as farmers. Existing policies only recognise women as farm labourers or cultivators, making it extremely difficult for them to be recognized as 'farmers'. It is next to impossible for women to get the land transferred in their names even after the death of their husbands. As a result, most women in agriculture cannot avail themselves of

government schemes meant for farmers. They cannot access institutional credit for farming or get subsidies. Without any economic or security, women are driven deeper into the circle of debt and penury.

A Corporate Contract against Women Farmers

The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement and Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 promotes contract farming with written agreements. Will small farmers get a better price through negotiation? Obviously not, because the corporate buyer will have the money and muscle power to buy produce at cheaper prices. We must remember that when agriculture was linked to the world market for the first time in 1995 it unleashed a spate of farmer's suicides because of the debt trap that it created. Today more than 300 thousand farmers have committed suicide and their widows are yet to be compensated and rehabilitated. This is likely to worsen with these laws.

Women and Modi's Agricultural Laws, Archana Prasad

According to the agricultural census, while 73.2% of rural women are engaged in farming activities, only 12.8% of them own the land that they work on. Land is owned by their husbands, fathers or brothers – most of whom are absent. And the value of women's work is starkly undermined where they work as labourers as seen in the wage gap.

As farming is becoming increasingly unviable, men are migrating to cities in search of work. The women of the family keep working on the land. Farming activities cover a wide range of physically demanding tasks. This includes preparing the land, sowing seeds, transplanting the seedlings, weeding, applying manure and pesticide and then harvesting, winnowing and threshing. There are also allied activities to attend to like cattle rearing and visiting the markets to sell their produce. In addition to their work in the fields, women have to take care of the children, do all the housework and cook.

One India, One Market: A Black Law against Women Retailers

This goal, as propagated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is legalized through the Farming Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020. The Act lays the foundation for weakening procurement of produce by the Government in Mandis at a Minimum Support Price. The door is being opened for Corporate Retail Chains who swallow small retailers. In India, women constitute a large section of vegetable and food retailers.

Women and Modi's Agricultural Laws, Archana Prasad

The three farm Acts passed by the Modi Government will spell doom for women farmers who form the bulk of small and marginal sections of Indian agriculture.

Women farmers, with their limited mobility and poor access to transport facilities, are especially on an unequal footing when it comes to travelling to another place to trade their produce or to bargain for better prices. The Farmers' Produce and Trade and Commerce Act, 2020 and the Contract Farming Act, 2020 will leave them vulnerable to exploitation by buyers/traders.

Corporate Control over Small Women Producers

With the Anti-Mandi Act the corporate giants will be free to buy produce at low prices. This control of production system from farmer to retail is popularly known as supply chains: in the world four corporations control the entire web of production and retail. When these cartels come to India, women workers and farmers will be the biggest losers. Women are not considered farmers, but they maintain small farms. There are also approximately 9 million home-based women workers in dairy and fisheries etc., which come under these laws. Given the conditions imposed, they will get even lower wages/prices than they have been getting before.

Women and Modi's Agricultural Laws, Archana Prasad

The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 has put the food security of the poor at stake. The PDS has been a lifeline for food access to all citizens during the pandemic, with even the government using it for distribution of relief food ration. The removal of cereals, pulses, onions, potatoes from the list of essential commodities will severely impact the nutrition needs of poor families. The changes in the ECA fully to de-regulate the food supply systems in India would have serious implications on the food availability of the most vulnerable parts of the population when such food is (invisibly) hoarded and becomes unaffordable.

When 38 percent of our children under the age of 5 years are stunted, 50 percent of pregnant women (15-49 years) are anaemic, the government should expand its PDS to address hunger and malnutrition. The pandemic more than ever has reiterated the need for strengthening public systems and has demonstrated how despite some weaknesses, the PDS and MNREGA have been the saviours for the poor.

These new Acts do not provide any security to the majority of women farmers, who are dependent on small and marginal holdings, either as direct cultivators or tenants. The poor literacy levels amongst farm women and caste, class and gender discrimination faced by them put them at a disadvantage while negotiating (written)

agreements with traders and corporate entities for selling their produce or for other services. The conciliation or dispute arbitration framework is clearly weighed against small and marginal farmers in general and women farmers in particular.

Profiteering from Hunger

India is placed 94th out of 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index; women's malnutrition is on the rise as per the survey of 22 states by the National Family Health Survey-5, 2020. This situation is likely to worsen with The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 which has direct implications for availability of affordable food for women. The Amendment removes all restrictions on hoarding and profiteering from food products; prices are set to rise as government will not interfere in the market.

Women are going to be adversely impacted by these laws as both producers and consumers. Women's burden and food insecurity of their families will increase.

Women and Modi's Agricultural Laws, Archana Prasad

Thirty three farmers have lost their lives so far on the borders of Delhi. The struggle has been continuing since November 26 despite severe repression and the bitter cold. 2020 has caused immeasurable suffering to women. It is high time the heartless central government climbs down from its high horse, stops its sell-out of the lives of the marginalized sections to the corporates and MNCs and withdraws the three agricultural Acts immediately.

Young Voices on Anti-Conversion Laws

West Bengal

**-Samprakta Bose
SFI, West Bengal**

In West Bengal some young students and scholars from Calcutta University discussed the issue of marriage by choice and anti-conversion laws. Here are some of the ideas which came up. The participants in the discussion were: Suryasikha Ray, Soumajit Majumder, Arijit Reeves, Samprakta Bose, Adwitiya Maiti, Natasha Aziz and Meghna Roy.

The Special Marriage Act 1956 was unanimously accepted as a progressive legislation which acknowledges the diversity in the population in India. It allows young couples to overcome the barriers of endogamy which are promoted by patriarchy. In a secular country, citizens cannot be barred from marrying each other on religious grounds. But if marriages have to be solemnized under personal laws, then either the man or the woman will have to convert to the other's faith. Where neither of the partners wishes to convert or where the partners do not identify themselves with any religion, the Special Marriage Act is the best option. However, some of the participants could not see any contradiction between the Uttar Pradesh Ordinance and the Special Marriage Act and felt that the former might encourage more people to take recourse to the latter.

It was admitted, however, that still some conversions consequent to inter-faith marriages do occur. But it was generally agreed that it would be quite irrational to think that these take place in such large numbers that a majority community may turn into a

The UP Government's Ordinance on Conversion and Inter-faith Marriage 2020

-Subhashini Ali, Vice-President, AIDWA

Long and bitter battles had been waged before Indian women could even try to access equality as a fundamental right. The adoption of the Constitution of India was an important milestone for them. These partial victories are again being severely threatened not only by the misogyny prevalent in a society where the caste system continues to cast its shadow over all aspects of our lives but by the presence of the Sangh Parivar-controlled Governments at the Centre and in many States. The Sangh Parivar never accepted the Indian Constitution and was committed from its inception to its replacement by the Manusmriti. This has now become a very real danger and many of the laws and policies that are being enacted and adopted must be seen in this context.



Women in Bengaluru protesting against the anti-conversion legislation passed in Uttar Pradesh.

The Sangh Parivar has always opposed the rights of women in many spheres and has emphasised the need to restrict them to the domestic sphere. They find this necessary for the preservation of the supposed purity of caste in their own version of Hindu society. This is one of the reasons why at a time when so-called 'honour crimes' are increasing

minority or vice versa because of them. On the contrary, any forcible intervention on any side by the state or the family into such decisions taken by adult individuals is likely to promote fundamentalism.

One interesting question which came up in the course of the discussion was whether something in the nature of the Uttar Pradesh Ordinance was not necessary to prevent 'conversion by force or fraud'. The one who had raised the question, however, himself found it suspicious that the Ordinance put the onus of proof on those who were involved in the conversion. This implied that every conversion at the time of marriage would come under the scrutiny of the District Magistrate, but where was the necessity for that? The other question which came up was, whether converting for the 'sole objective' of marriage is an occasion for state intervention. It was felt that it was not one of the functions of the state to find out if someone was converting solely for the purpose of marriage. It was also mentioned, however, that there have been court orders which have contradicted each other on this point. The Supreme Court gave the judgment that what religion one would follow after marriage was a private matter.

Tamil Nadu

**-Kavitha Gajendran,
AIDWA, Tamil Nadu**

The Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance was passed on 28 November, 2020. All India Democratic Women's Association, Tamil Nadu held a discussion among its young cadres to clarify their own perspective on this Ordinance. The discussion was

exponentially, the Central Government is implicitly strengthening the 'khap panchayats' by refusing to bring a comprehensive law against such crimes. Inter-faith marriages, of course, invite special venom and violence. In many of their public statements the Sangh Parivar accuse the Muslim community of resorting to every kind of fraud and deception to entrap, seduce and abduct Hindu women, forcibly convert them and then subject them to terrible atrocities and injustice. This is a very important element in its project of communal polarisation that has seen increasing political success over the last few decades. Recently, it has coined the phrase 'Love Jihad' as part of its campaign. Several Courts and even the BJP Minister for Home at the Centre have all stated publicly that there is no evidence of the existence of any such scheme against Hindu society, but this does not deter the Sangh Parivar from spreading hatred and encouraging violence in its name.

The right to choose her partner is a fundamental right for women. In India, this right has been denied to them legally for a long time; now this injustice is sought to be revived in the name of tradition. The continuing widespread belief that Indian society rejects the idea of marriages entered into freely on the basis of choice irrespective of caste and community is raised to the level of paranoia through such campaign and the old idea that it is the responsibility of women in particular to preserve varnashramadharma is revived through it. But this is contested by an ever-increasing number of women who are willing to pay a very heavy price to exert this right that, for them, fulfils a basic yearning for freedom and equality. Every year, thousands of young women enter into inter-caste and inter-community marriages, risking violence and even death and the numbers are growing.

It is this fundamental right that is being denied by the recent Ordinance passed by the UP Government which other States like MP and Haryana are set to

held via a zoom meet and it went on for nearly two hours. Along with Rani, AIDWA state office bearer, writer Jeevalakshmi, Research scholar Suseendra, activists in social media Suthir, Nivedha and Narmadha participated. Sindhan facilitated the whole process.

Rani opened the discussion highlighting AIDWA's consistent efforts to uphold the individual's right of choice. She mentioned the numerous struggles the movement had to organise in cases of inter-caste marriages in the state. She also mentioned the Hadiya case of inter-faith marriage in Kerala which attracted much media attention and eventually exposed the hollowness of the motivated myth of 'Love Jihad'.

Nivedha talked about the influences of the casteist social structures over Indian women and put forward the widespread insensitivity regarding gender identities including LGBTQ identities. She connected the anti-conversion law with the ongoing campaigns since the 1920s of the proponents of the 'Hindu Rashtra'. She also highlighted the methods used by Indian fascistic forces to spread its ideology facilitating the implementation of ordinances or laws which suit their purpose. The dire efforts of BJP in undoing the growth of democracy achieved over decades of Indian history and push us backwards lies behind this.

Jeevalakshmi identified the Ordinance as having a political and economic context. She spoke of the issue of dominant caste practices against Dalits and prejudices against the Islamic community. She mentioned how Indian caste and religion revolve around women, their sexuality and the exchange of property. And as

emulate. The UP Ordinance is extremely draconian and comes down heavily against two important fundamental rights – the right to change one's religion and the right to enter into marriage by choice with someone even if that person belongs to a different religion. This Ordinance comes in spite of a recent judgment of the Allahabad High Court in which the Court ruled that *'Once age of Priyanka Kharwar @ Alia is not in dispute as she is reported to be around 21 years, petitioner nos. 1 to 3 cannot be made accused for committing an offence under Section 363 IPC or 366 IPC as victim on her own left her home in order to live with Salamat Ansari.... We do not see Priyanka Kharwar and Salamat as Hindu and Muslim, rather as two grown up individuals who out of their own free will and choice are living together peacefully and happily over a year. The Courts and the Constitutional Courts in particular are enjoined to uphold the life and liberty of an individual guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. Right to live with a person of his/her choice irrespective of religion professed by them, is intrinsic to right to life and personal liberty. Interference in a personal relationship would constitute a serious encroachment into the right to freedom of choice of the two individuals. We fail to understand that if the law permits two persons even of the same sex to live together peacefully then neither any individual nor a family nor even State can have objection to relationship of two major individuals who out of their own free will are living together. Decision of an individual who is of the age of majority, to live with an individual of his/her choice is strictly a right of an individual and when this right is infringed it would constitute breach of his/her fundamental right to life and personal liberty as it includes right to freedom of choice, to choose a partner and right to live with dignity as enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution of India.'*

This judgment had reference to two significant judgments delivered in the same Court by different

property defines political power women's reproductive power used to perpetuate inheritance through blood-line has to be controlled by the family. She highlighted how the ordinance could be challenged judicially through Article 21 of the Constitution upholding right to life with respect and integrity, Article 25 upholding right to freedom of religion and Article 19.1.G supporting right to work. She said that the Ordinance is ideological rather than legal and meant to deny power to women and minorities. She suggested that we must project the ordinance as a fundamental human rights violation in our campaigns.

Narmadha began with explaining the complexities in the Special Marriage Act 1956. Already-existing caste influences makes the Hindu Marriage Act appear to be simple and the Special Marriage Act as full of hurdles. She said that the UP Anti-Conversion Ordinance coming up at such a juncture will surely increase psychological pressures on individuals, particularly on Dalits, Minorities and women. She compared the Ordinance to the Nuremberg laws in Fascist Germany and linked it with the Brahminical Patriarchy of BJP and its vision of Hindu Rashtra. She finished with the necessity to build movements against it.

Suseendra began her argument by emphasizing the existence of the casteist patriarchal system that consistently works to project women as second class citizens. She also highlighted its projection of a particular community as 'enemy' thus dehumanising its members. She insisted on the need for continuous efforts to generate dialogues on gender bias, gender sensitivity and gender equality and to inspire honest introspection on gender

Bench. In the first, the Judge ruled that conversion for the purpose of marriage could not be accepted and, therefore, the marriage itself could not be recognised. In the second, the Judge accorded full security to a same-sex couple who asked for protection. The Judges quoted above held the first judgment to be bad in law and appreciated the second. Significantly the new ordinance has similarities with the first judgment. It may be noted that the Supreme Court in its judgment in the Hadiya Case where a young woman's conversion to Islam and her marriage to a Muslim were both questioned, held unambiguously that she was within her rights both to choose her religion and her husband. The UP ordinance pays no heed to this either.

The UP Ordinance strikes a blow at judicial efforts attempting to expand and guarantee fundamental rights of women. Some of its provisions in brief are as follows:

Section 3 prohibits any conversion by 'use or practice of misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means' and specifically 'for marriage' [unless a prior sanction to convert and marry has been obtained from the District Magistrate].

A person found guilty of offence under Section 3 will be punishable with imprisonment from 1 to 5 years and fine up to Rs. 15,000.

Section 6 states that any such marriage 'either by converting himself/herself before or after marriage or by converting the woman before or after marriage', shall be declared 'null and void' by the family court or where the family court has not been established by the court having jurisdiction to try such case on a petition presented by either party thereto against the other party of the marriage.

The ordinance further states that the burden of proof as to whether a religious conversion was effected through misrepresentation, force, undue influence,

perceptions and on prevalent norms in understanding gender issues.

Suthir started the talk with how education, political and social ambience act as the major factors in determining individual's choice. He also mentioned how far coordinated movements are essential to combat the Brahminical patriarchal order and BJP hegemony. He requested AIDWA to build a mass campaign to bring Indian women at the forefront of this fight against Fascism.

As the discussion came to an end, all the participants through the exchange of political, judicial, cultural ideas contextualising the Ordinance were filled with the spirit to campaign against it. It was exposed very clearly that it is the 'chronology' of Article 370 abrogation, Ayodhya Judgement, Triple Talaq Act, CAA Bill which has culminated into the UP Anti-Conversion Ordinance for converting laws into a weapon against the Muslim community in India.

Uttar Pradesh

-Madhu Garg, Central Secretariat member, AIDWA

The Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance 2020 has not only encouraged right wing outfits across the state to intervene into personal affairs on the pretext of checking the forced conversion of Hindu women in the name of marriage to Muslims, which they term as 'love jihad', but where the girl is Muslim and the boy is Hindu, the guardians of law have shown that they think little of using legal provisions to protect the former. Thus implementation of laws is wholly selective. Shabnam (name changed) who is now in touch with

coercion, allurements or by any fraudulent means or by marriage lies on the person who has caused the conversion and where such conversion has been facilitated by any person, on such other person.

This Ordinance bans inter-faith marriages for all practical purposes, allows wholly unwarranted interference by the state into private lives and also violates other basic human and judicial rights both for men and women. It will also be used to persecute Muslims and to create further polarisation. It is important to remember that it is this very use of communal polarisation that has catapulted the BJP into power and it has used this power to curtail the rights of women in many spheres. On the other hand, its policy of unbridled privatisation in education and closure of Government schools has certainly impacted the right of girls to education; similarly, its policies of privatisation of health facilities and lifting of controls on the prices of essential drugs, has severely impacted women's health. It is also true that BJP-ruled states are the most unsafe for women; the Hathras case has exposed the UP Govt's determination to protect upper-caste rapists accused of the rape and murder of a Dalit woman.



AIDWA activists in UP protesting against Hathras horror and demanding resignation of CM Yogi Adityanath.

AIDWA has from its inception stood for women's right of choice against a gender-unjust society and

AIDWA, is struggling for her religious identity ever since she was ditched by her Hindu husband. Her in-laws refuse to take her in because they say she is a Muslim; on the other hand, her parental home is closed to her because she converted to Hinduism. She got married at an Arya Samaj Temple in September 2017, but went on to face the 'biggest betrayal of her life' thereafter. She says, my fight is to find out whether I am Shabnam or Sarita.

She did the LLB and then LLM courses before joining a coaching institute as a law teacher.

insensitive governments. But now this right is sought to be demolished altogether by the UP Ordinance and similar laws promised by BJP Governments in other states and these should be opposed as part and parcel of a determined comprehensive strategy to do away with the promise of equality and fundamental rights held out by the Constitution to Indian women. If this is not thwarted, the unequal and unjust system sanctioned in Manusmriti which ensured that women were controlled by their fathers, husbands and sons throughout their lives is going to be re-invented in our own time by manipulating the legal structure. Rights and laws are inextricably linked. An attack on one is an attack on both.

Her husband Akash was a student there. He started pressurizing her to get married to him and threatened to commit suicide if she refused. Her parents were also against this interfaith marriage but ultimately Shabnam went against her parents and went through a conversion to tie the knot with Akash in an Arya Samaj Temple. After some time, her in-laws started harassing her saying that she was a Muslim and mounted pressure on her to end the marriage.

She lodged two separate cases of domestic violence and harassment against them, but police filed final report in both cases. Her in-laws even arranged a fake letter from the Arya Samaj Temple that her marriage with Akash was not solemnised and no certificate was issued to them. They used the same letter to prove her marriage null and void to get their son remarried.

Shabnam lodged FIR against them at the concerned police station in August 2019 but the investigation is still pending in the matter. Now, the police inspector is saying that the investigation officer has sought legal opinion as to whether the certificate of Arya Samaj was sufficient to consider the marriage valid or not. When an AIDWA delegation met with the police officer and demanded speedy investigation and filing of chargesheet as early as possible, the answer was that the investigation may continue for 10 years! It is just a cruel joke that while chargesheet has to be filed within 90 days of FIR, the police may, if they wish, prolong investigation for 10 years!

The total subservience of the Uttar Pradesh police to the authoritarianism of the Yogi Government becomes clear as daylight through Shabnam's plight. There is no question but that this government will bring black Ordinances to harass women, but would deliberately subvert laws which might have protected them. However, Shabnam is still determined to stand up for her rights and AIDWA will stand by her.

National Education Policy, 2020 and Culture in Ancient India

-Preeti Bhattacharya, Assistant Professor,
Department of Ancient History, Calcutta University



National Education Policy is on its way to being implemented at a moment when the nation is yet to emerge from the trauma of the pandemic times. What will be the long-term effects of this policy on public education? No doubt this has to be debated and comprehended at many levels. We are only going to discuss here one of the aspects of the document.

At each step, the NEP document proposes to take its cue from the heritage of education in India and promises to retrieve this glorious heritage from ancient times for modern India. This claim necessitates a reading of historical evidence and what we propose to discuss here is its approach to this.

- It is interesting that traditions of Indian education referred to in the document belong solely to the ancient times. There is neither mention of the rich and various traditions of learning in the medieval period nor of the educational ideas forged on the anvil of the Freedom Struggle from which Modern India emerged.
- Consider also that extravagant words mouthed about higher education in Ancient India are nothing but lightly-used commonplaces, mere efforts to catch the eye with terms like 'Sanskrit Knowledge system' and the '64 forms of art' and with dropping of the names of Takshashila, Nalanda, Gargi, Maitreyee, Panini and Charak with no concern for their true context. How are these related with one another? What is their applicability today? They serve only to create a miasma of

confusion by being slapped on one another higgledy-piggledy. The sole purpose is thus to build up a seamless unitary idea of the 'heritage of education' in India.

- The document presupposes that we have a complete and clear idea of what education was like in Ancient India. But students of the discipline know well how meagre hard evidence is in the area and how problematic the interpretation of whatever we have. For instance, what do we know of educational facilities in ancient Takshashila? Most of our information is based on anthologies of Buddhist Pali Jatakas. We are not certain about their dates and it is still being debated to what extent they may be used as historical source. But the NEP document has nothing to do with these concerns and assumes that we know everything about the infrastructure, the syllabus and the objectives of educational institutions there. Even nationalist historians, a century earlier, had not presumed to describe Takshashila as a formally structured institution in the modern sense. It has rather been perceived as a loose concourse of learned people and inquisitive scholars held together by largely individual patronage.
- For this very reason you cannot talk in the same breath in a historical sense of Takshashila together with Nalanda or Vikramshila. The gap in time is also considerable. When the Chinese pilgrim, Fa-Jian, visited Takshashila in the fifth century CE, it had already lost its eminence as an educational centre. He makes no mention of any university at Nalanda. It was only later that Nalanda developed as a centre of learning. No source mentions Vikramshila before the 8th century CE. The structure and the system of patronage which prevailed in Nalanda and Vikramshila, with their link to Buddhist monasteries were of a completely different kind. Our information about them also comes from very different sources.
- What is the 'Sanskrit knowledge system' glorified and sought to be revived in the NEP document? It is not at all clear. Nor is it known whether any such 'system' was acknowledged in Ancient India. One can only surmise on the basis of available facts that the epistemological boundaries of institutions were much more open. Takshashila as the centre of the Gandhara region absorbed many different cultural strains. Persians, Bactrians, Shakas and Kushanas not only extended their political domination in this region, but left enduring cultural traces. The region was multi-lingual and multi-cultural. Not only the 'three holy texts'(the Vedas) but 18 different 'arts' including medicine as well as history, martial arts and grammar were taught here, although we know that medicine as a discipline was looked down upon in Brahminical traditions of learning. The early science of medicine developed rather in the context of contemporary Buddhist schools. The possibly mythical physician Jivaka was an icon representing the Buddhists' respect for professional skills. In Nalanda and Vikramshila, which were Buddhist set-ups, the study of the Vedas, of grammar, of 'Arthashastra' and of philosophical traditions associated with Brahminism were not excluded. Together with Sanskrit Mahayana

texts, Pali and Prakrit texts were also studied. After the 8th century CE, as these centres developed links with Tibetan scholarship the practice of translating seminal texts became widespread. The fictitious pictures of monolithic Sanskrit learning are not borne out by evidence.

- The idea of the '64 arts' is highlighted in the document to prove the 'multidisciplinarity' of ancient knowledge systems. In the 21st century Indian students may feel comfortable combining physical sciences with music because, after all, it is 'in their blood'! The problem is that the document omits to mention where exactly in any institutional syllabus of ancient times the reference to the '64 arts' may be found! From whatever we know of Takshashila, we rather find that here the emphasis was on specialization and intensive studies. The '64 arts' find prominence specifically within the space of non-institutional elite culture. Banabhatta's Kadambari is mentioned in the document in this context, the mention of Kamasutra is deliberately avoided. If mention had been made of it, the document would have had to acknowledge that together with polished 'nagarakas', accomplished courtesans too had to attain expertise in the '64 arts'.
- As far as we can see, the NEP document pays no heed to chronology or to ordinary principles of reason in its interpretation of historical sources. Many personages named here in an ahistorical jumble, such as Gargi, Maitreyee, Kautilya and Panini may not even be historical characters, but icons representing specific trends at some historical juncture.

Then how do we assess their appearance in this official document of 2020? We can only say that they are the signs of a very recent and much broader project that is being sought to be implemented in this country, that of confusing history with myth and myth with history.

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