

# To fail or not to fail?

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## Introduction

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 has been heralded as landmark legislation by educators as it introduced some radical changes such as the concepts of No-Detention Policy (NDP), and Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE). These concepts, also enunciated in the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, are based on the true goals of education, i.e. that knowledge is not an end in itself but a continuum, and are recognized world-wide as sound principles of pedagogy and assessment. However, the draft New Education Policy (NEP) 2016, after briefly presenting arguments both in favour and against the NDP, recommends a review of the NDP under the RTE. We believe that such a view has been taken without informed discussion on the specific and deeper issues related to the NDP. Through this article, we present evidence using national data that the implementation of NDP has not systematically lowered the learning levels of students- the popular perception with respect to NDP. We also present multiple reasons as to why a pre-mature review of the NDP provision is disturbing and problematic.

The recommendation of the review of the NDP provision under the RTE is based on five years of implementation of the Act, and suggests bringing back the detention policy for upper primary levels, i.e. restricting no detention only till Class V, which is in stark contrast to Section 16 of the RTE Act which categorically states that “No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education”. Such a recommendation would also have indirect consequences for the CCE clause prescribed in Section 29 (h) of the Act, which has to necessarily be seen in conjunction with the NDP, as together they make for a different system of learning. When the NDP is seen holistically with other curricular provisions of the Act such as CCE, age appropriate admissions, no board examinations till Class 8, no corporal punishment and a stress-free teaching-learning environment, it creates a non-threatening school environment, conducive for learning for children (Sharma, 2016).

The recommendation, which has been supported by multiple stakeholders including teachers, state governments, parents and policymakers, is based on the assumption that learning levels, as measured by achievement tests conducted by both state and non-state agencies, have fallen because of the NDP. The major criticisms that have been put forward for doing away with the NDP are- students are no longer serious as there is no fear of failure, attendance of students has dropped, teachers are not able to

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maintain discipline, that parents are no longer strict with their children regarding learning, and that the percentage of students repeating grade 9 is increasing across the country. Such attribution of fall in student learning outcomes to the NDP is both unsubstantiated and misguided, and the real reasons for the falling learning levels have been conveniently neglected in this assault on NDP and review of the RTE Act. Within this context, we begin with a critical discussion on the reasons behind inclusion of the provision of NDP in the Act, and move on to analyzing an often quoted national dataset to find evidence which supports or rejects the hypothesis of fall in student learning levels due to implementation of the NDP. We follow this quantitative analysis with a critical analysis of the problematic and worrisome arguments consolidated to recommend the review of the NDP provision in the Act, so that this draft recommendation in NEP 2016 is accepted or rejected based on solid foundation.

### **Rationale for the No-Detention Policy**

The current recommendation for review of NDP would effectively undo the stance the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD, 2012), which is as follows- *“The ‘no detention’ provision is made because examinations are often used for eliminating children who obtain poor marks. Once declared ‘fail’, children either repeat grade or leave the school altogether. Compelling a child to repeat a class is demotivating and discouraging.”* This stance of the MHRD clearly conveys the strong equity concerns that led to the NDP, and the effort to undo the wastage in the schooling system due to high repetition and dropout rates, that plagued the Indian education system since the 1990s (UNESCO, 1998).

Moreover, this stance was coupled with the provision of CCE, the twin pillar of the NDP, which was envisaged as a non-threatening, holistic evaluation framework that would release the child from the fear and trauma of failure and would enable the teacher to pay greater attention to each child’s learning and performance. Further, there is no research evidence from anywhere in the world that indicates that grade repetition helps children learn and perform better (MHRD, 2012). However, there is research that does prove the adverse academic, social and emotional effects of grade repetition on children (Diris, 2016; Duggan, 2014; Andrew, 2014).

### **Impact of NDP on Learning Levels**

In order to find evidence for the hypothesis that no-detention policy leads to fall in learning levels due to multiple reasons as enunciated above, we plan to look at the learning levels before and after the implementation of the NDP. Assuming that detention improves learning levels of students, we track the performance of students of a given grade in the period before the implementation of the NDP, hoping to see rising or steady levels of performance (Assumption 1). We expect to see this as under the detention system students would not be promoted unless they meet or exceed the required minimum levels of performance. Moreover, if the NDP causes systematic reduction in learning levels, we should see a comparatively downward or stagnant trend in the performance across the states in India (Assumption 2). This trend would be observed as the students would be promoted to the next grade without any compulsion of learning. Further, any tracking of the performance of specific cohorts of students being

promoted under the NDP, should reflect stagnant levels of performance as those students move into later years of schooling without the requisite levels of skills (Assumption 3), i.e. if low-performing students are promoted and NDP dis-incentivizes learning, then the performance levels of the cohort taught only under the NDP system would be expected to stagnate. This section of the article attempts to find empirical evidence for expected findings articulated above.

A major portion of our population lives in the rural areas, 69 % as per CENSUS 2011<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore expected that a significant number of elementary school students would come from rural regions. We thus use the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data as indicative of the student learning levels in math and reading, as the report is a result of a survey conducted in rural households. It measures the degree of preparedness of a child in reading based on his or her demonstrated ability to read words, sentences, and paragraphs from a standard two textbook. For Math, it's the ability of the child to recognize numbers and perform the operations of subtraction and division as per his or her grade level. The ASER surveys have been conducted from the year 2005 upto 2014, but for the purposes of this paper, we will use the data from the years 2006 to 2014<sup>3</sup>. We would only be analyzing the math performance of students, as Math skills are regarded to be a good measure of “school effectiveness” (Azam, Kingdon, & Wu, 2015). The reader is however encouraged to analyze the reading data and student performance similarly, and use his or her judgment to infer the results.

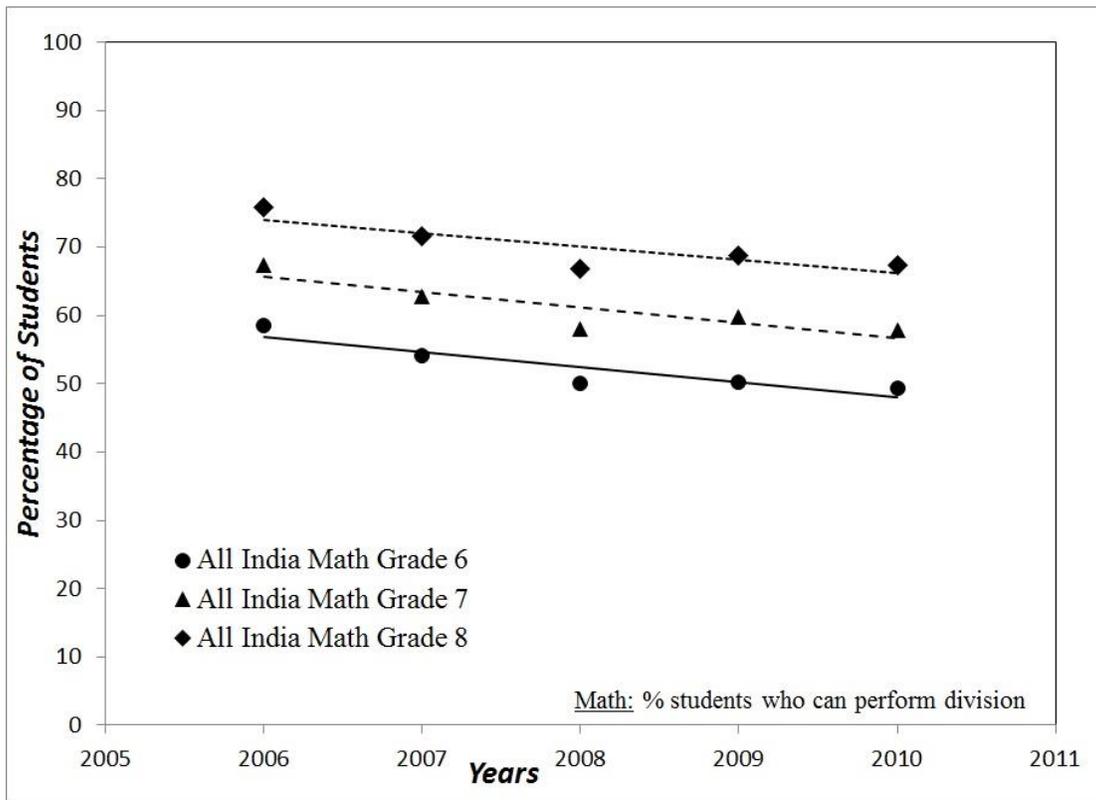
We start by plotting the All-India percentage of students in upper primary classes (i.e. Grades 6, 7 & 8), who could solve the division based problems when the survey was conducted from 2006 to 2010, and is depicted in Fig. 1. As the RTE Act came into effect on 1st April 2010, we assume that the students had not undergone the experience of the no-detention policy till the academic year 2010-11. We observe that across the grades there is an average drop of nine percentage points during this time interval (2006-2010). This finding runs contrary to Assumption 1 made by us and propounded by many, i.e. under the detention system, the performance of students in a given grade would either improve or remain stagnant as they would necessarily need to meet or exceed the required minimum levels of performance.

The mathematical concept of division is taught at the Grade 4/5 level, and hence we look at the performance of Grade 5 students in our analysis. Data from the same reports at the state level show that while some states such as Tamil Nadu and Manipur depict an increased level of performance from the academic year 2010-11, i.e. post implementation of NDP, some states such as Uttar Pradesh show a stable performance of students (Fig. 2). Moreover, some states like West Bengal have been able to arrest the rapid decline in learning levels of students post implementation of NDP from the academic year 2010-11. This finding runs contrary to Assumption 2 made by us, i.e. NDP would lead to systematic reduction in learning levels of students across states as they would be promoted to the next grade without any compulsion of learning.

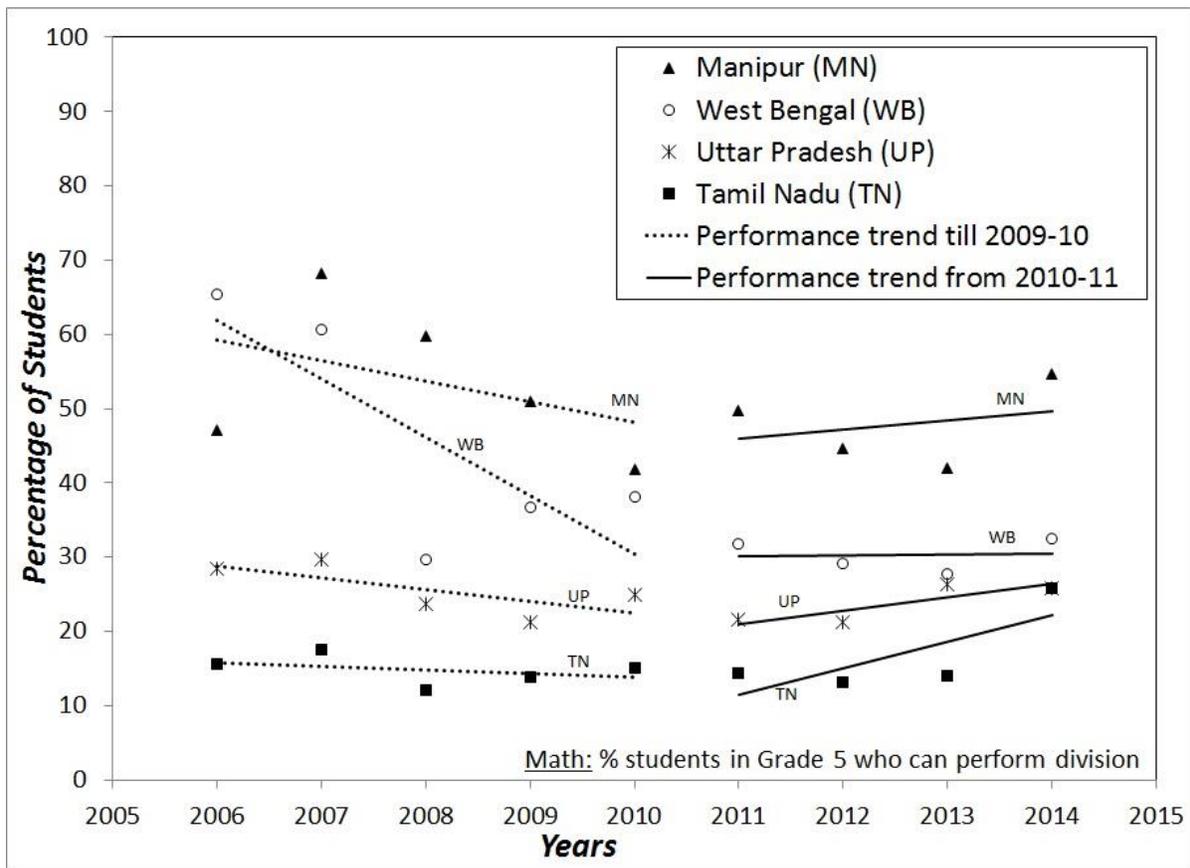
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<sup>2</sup> <http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/censusinfodashboard/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> The 2005 study used a different sampling method. Although a different math assessment tool was used in 2006 (exclusion of recognizing single digit numbers), we only look at the ability to perform division (the highest level of ability measured).



**Fig. 1** Graph of Math abilities of students in Grades 6, 7 and 8 from 2005-06 to 2009-10



**Fig. 2** Graph of Math abilities of students in Grade 5 in select states from 2007-08 to 2013-14

Finally, we trace the math skills of student cohorts who attended grade 3 in the years 2010, 2011 and 2012 (Fig. 3). For this, we consider the ability of a student to perform subtraction, a concept taught in Grade 3, as a measure of math performance. We do not take the student cohorts from grade 5 for this analysis as in that case, we would not have a single cohort which would have only been exposed to the NDP. The resulting cohort graph shows that the learning levels of students in grade 3 in the year 2012 have not stagnated, and approximately match the learning levels achieved by the students in grade 3 in the years 2010 and 2011. To put it in other words, the students who have been completely taught under the NDP are able to show the same level of performance as those students who have partly been taught the same concept under the detention policy system. This finding runs contrary to Assumption 3 made by us, i.e. if NDP dis-incentivizes learning, then the learning levels of a student cohort only taught under the NDP system would stagnate over time.

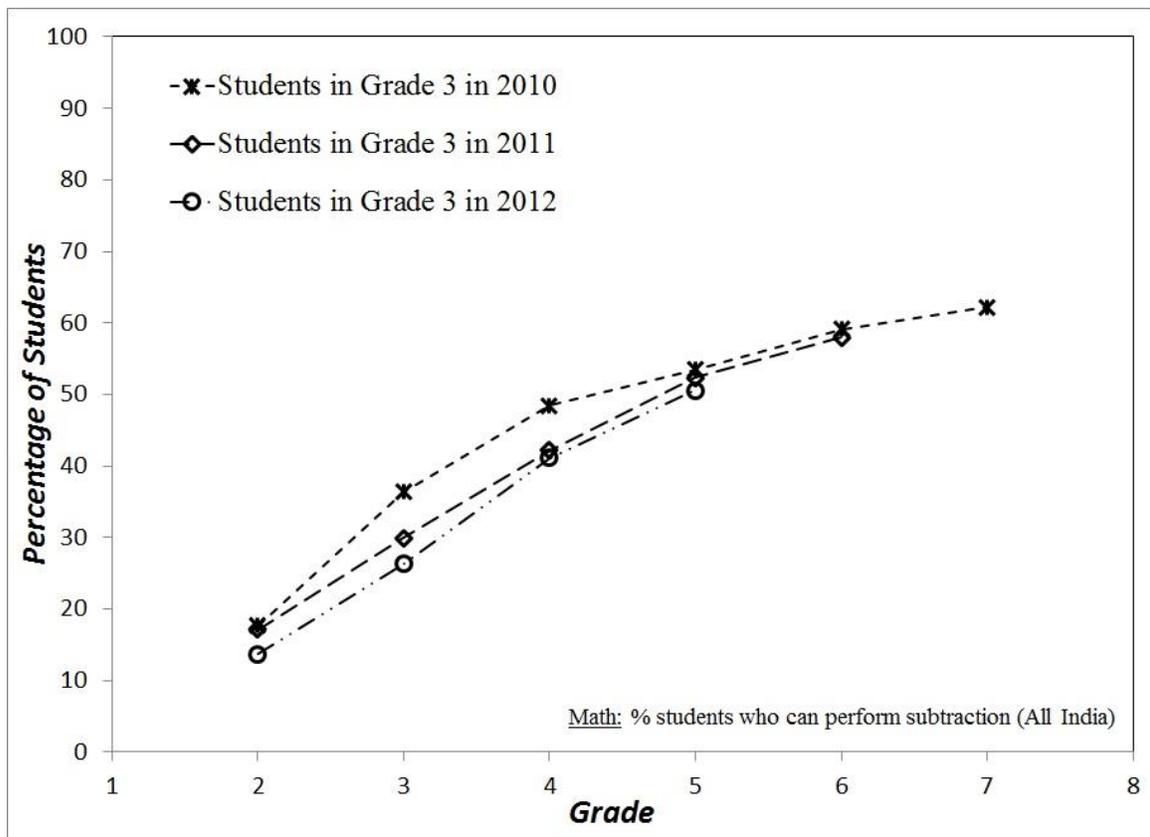


Fig. 3 Graph of math abilities of students in the same cohort.

### NDP- Flawed Policy or Flawed Implementation?

The implementation of the NDP under the RTE Act suffers from several fallouts. For instance, the basic fact that NDP and CCE must go hand in hand, has been grossly overlooked. This has been exacerbated by the misconception that no-detention means ‘no assessments’, although the same has been clarified by

the MHRD (MHRD, 2012). Despite issuance of guidelines by CBSE (CBSE, 2010), NCERT, MHRD and state-level bodies at various points in time with respect to CCE (Ambast & Gaur, 2015), there continues to exist a lack of awareness regarding the finer aspects of CCE and its implementation. The concerted opposition towards NDP by several state governments and education ministers, and the consequent recommendation for review of the NDP provision in the RTE Act is problematic for multiple reasons. Firstly, such an opposition to NDP due to falling learning levels rests the blame solely on the child and ignores the role of teachers, schools, and the government. It is problematic as it solely places the liability for low learning levels on the child, exonerating other education functionaries within the system (Nawani, 2016). The basic question left out in this outright opposition to NDP is- “Why penalize the child, when the problem lies in the system?”

Secondly, the recommendation for detaining a child after Class 5 is against the fundamental provision of the RTE Act, i.e. free and compulsory education for all children upto Class 8. The phrase ‘free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of six and fourteen’ doesn’t mean that every child has the right to be enrolled in school for eight years irrespective of the learning that is being gained (Ambast, 2016). The phrase includes many other rights such as the rights against barriers to access, against harassment and discrimination, the right to learn in a safe building with adequate facilities, and the right to not be detained or expelled. All these rights are inter-dependent and mutually reinforcing, and tinkering with any one of them amounts to interfering with the right of every child to complete elementary education, i.e. learning eight years of prescribed curricula.

Thirdly, failures in implementation of the policy are being interpreted as failure of the policy itself. NDP becomes useless in an environment where there is no, little or mis-implementation of the CCE policy. Due to lack of basic awareness and capacity for effective implementation of CCE, there is gap in the system of comprehensive assessment at the school-level, and thus the view of NDP as that of automatic promotion to the next grade, with or without learning. CCE, that assesses both cognitive and non-cognitive areas, and both academic and non-academic areas, gives the required buffer against the need to fail children on a set of narrowly and rigidly defined indicators of learning (Sharma, 2016). However, in its current form, CCE has been reduced to a series of assessments, resulting in multiple forms to be filled, and not as assessments that help timely teacher interventions. Flawed implementation doesn’t mean flawed policy.

Fourthly, the only seeming silver bullet in the recommendation that detention should be resorted to only after giving the child remedial coaching and at least two extra chances to prove his/her capability, looks impractical. The suggestion is that this coaching be provided by the teacher to the student after school hours, with the help of technology. However, it is difficult to understand how technology would help the learning process of a struggling child, and how the teacher, who is mostly hard-pressed for time, will find the time for such an engagement, and be able to mediate their role with respect to technology. Also,

given the diversity of students that access the state-run schools, the extra effort required from the teacher beyond school hours, may be categorised into several areas as the needs of these students are varied.

Lastly, a significant number of stakeholders in the teaching-learning process, such as teachers and administrators at the cluster/block/district level, continue to operate under the assumption that students cannot learn in the absence of fear of failure (Sharma, 2016), despite a lack of evidence (elaborated above) that it can do so. This is reflected in the magnitude of opposition towards NDP at the ground level. However, such an assumption is unfounded as failure of non-implementation of other two related key provisions of the act, i.e. CCE and pupil-teacher-ratios (PTRs), have to be taken into account, and any decrease in learning levels cannot, thus, solely be attributed to the NDP. Therefore, it seems that the problem of implementation may in fact be a problem of beliefs in the underlying philosophy of NDP and CCE.

Hence, the phenomena of decreasing learning levels, poor learning outcomes, and increase in the number of grade 9 repeaters, even if assumed to be true, are products of many factors which influence learning, and cannot be solely attributed to the NDP. It is important that the failures of implementation of other key provisions of the RTE are critically examined, such as high PTR and the acute shortage of (qualified) teachers. It is unrealistic to expect that CCE would work in classrooms with high PTRs, and thus, the success of NDP is jeopardized. We also need to recognize that such a recommendation comes in a context when most teachers country-wide are still struggling to fully understand what CCE means or how the NDP impacts the learning processes inside the classrooms.

Such a review of the NDP comes due to questioning of the efficacy of the CCE model, rather than an active debate, involving multiple stakeholders, on the systematic adoption of the twin approaches of NDP and CCE, and integration of these policies and practices at the ground level. Scrapping NDP, even for the upper primary students, is a retrograde step which will legitimize a system of education based on pure textbook (rote) learning, which fails to acknowledge knowledge as a continuous engagement with a learning continuum. Such a step would be regressive and would effectively undo the decade long battles fought for their inclusion in the RTE Act, and would in effect take us back to the 'wastage in education' problem of the 1990s (UNESCO, 1998). Moreover, reliance on a system of detention for progress into the next grade tries to mask the incapacity of the system to teach first-generation learners and children with special needs.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Our findings on the performance levels of students during the detention policy system are in line with the existing literature, which shows no positive impact of detention on learning (Andrew, 2014; Diris, 2016; Duggan, 2014; Jimerson, 2001). Our data analysis and resultant findings challenge the recommendation of bringing back detention at the upper primary stage to improve the learning levels. Further, the evidence of increasing percentage of students with improved math abilities in the NDP only

cohort, over subsequent years, seems contrary to the claim that learning has been adversely affected under the RTE.

Based on our analysis of the current context, we conclude that education reform that consists of concepts like NDP and CCE should not be made scapegoat for the problems that lie at the heart of the education system. It would be unfair to attack the child-centric policy of NDP, as the constituency that gets most affected by it cannot speak for itself (Ambast, 2016), especially when enough time has not been given for the effective realisation and shaping of the radically different teaching-learning process envisaged by CCE and NDP.

We, therefore, recommend that the engagement with teachers be deepened for the successful implementation of learning oriented reforms such as NDP and CCE. Moreover, it is imperative that both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes be aligned with the philosophy and requirements of NDP and CCE, and that they be supported and equipped with the resources and expertise required for improving student learning outcomes. It is important that questions be raised on the current conceptualization of CCE at the ground level and that appropriate frameworks be arrived at, which would help achieve the objectives of holistic learning and assessment. Moreover, we urge the research fraternity and the MHRD to document the good practices on NDP and CCE from states and schools across India, to highlight the success of the policy.

If the recommendation in its current form becomes a part of the NEP 2016, we would have brought back a system of pass-fail that would effectively suppress the non-threatening, holistic learning environment envisaged under the RTE Act. We, therefore, suggest a re-evaluation of the repeal of the no-detention policy for upper primary classes in light of the existing studies in the field of education research and the presented empirical evidence on the performance of students in detention and no-detention settings. It is hoped that the NEP 2016 would actively identify the role of teachers, schools, and education departments in making sure that children learn, instead of letting a majority of children believe that they have failed because of reasons inherent to them. NEP 2016 must re-look at the current design and implementation failures to find solutions to them, instead of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

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