

TRANSFORMING INDIAN EDUCATION: A POLICY REVIEW OF NEP AND ITS PREDECESSORS

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ABSTRACT :

India's educational landscape has undergone significant transformation over the decades, shaped by a series of landmark policy initiatives aimed at enhancing access, equity, quality, and relevance. This paper presents a comprehensive review of national education policies in India, with a particular focus on the evolution from the National Policy on Education (1968, 1986, and its 1992 modification) to the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). The study examines how these policies have addressed the changing socio-economic needs of the country, navigated regional disparities, and attempted to modernize teaching and learning systems.

Through a critical analysis of policy documents, implementation outcomes, and reform challenges, the paper highlights the progressive shift from input-oriented frameworks toward outcome-based education and skill development. Special attention is given to NEP 2020, which introduces structural reforms such as the 5+3+3+4 curricular model, emphasis on mother-tongue instruction, integration of vocational education, and the use of technology in governance and pedagogy.

The review also identifies recurring gaps in execution, such as funding inadequacies, infrastructural limitations, and resistance to change at institutional levels. By situating the policy developments within India's broader developmental goals, the paper underscores the transformative potential of

NEP 2020 while advocating for more inclusive, context-sensitive, and adaptable policy implementation.

This analysis contributes to ongoing discussions on educational reform by offering insights into how India's national education policies have responded to internal aspirations and global shifts, and how they can be better aligned with the vision of equitable and lifelong learning for all.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic fabric of any nation. In a diverse and populous country like India, where disparities in access, quality, and outcomes of education persist across regions and communities, the role of well-structured and visionary educational policies becomes paramount. Over the past seven decades, India has formulated several national education policies, each reflecting the evolving priorities, challenges, and aspirations of the country.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968, formulated after the recommendations of the Kothari Commission, laid the foundation for a uniform and equitable educational structure. It emphasized the promotion of regional languages, the expansion of educational opportunities, and the adoption of a common school system. The NPE 1986, revised in 1992, sought to universalize elementary education, enhance teacher training, and integrate science and technology into learning. However, gaps remained in terms of

implementation, equity, and adaptability to global educational trends.

Fast forward to the National Education Policy 2020, a landmark reform introduced after a gap of 34 years, which aims to overhaul the Indian education system with an emphasis on holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning. The NEP 2020 envisions transforming India into a knowledge-based economy by restructuring school education through the 5+3+3+4 system, promoting mother-tongue instruction, introducing vocational education at an early stage, and integrating technology into all aspects of teaching, learning, and administration.

This paper seeks to review and analyze the trajectory of India's national educational policies with a focus on continuity, change, and impact. It aims to critically examine the philosophical underpinnings, policy goals, implementation mechanisms, and outcomes of major educational reforms. By tracing how India's educational policy discourse has evolved—from expansion and access to quality and innovation—this study provides a contextual understanding of where Indian education stands today and what future directions may be necessary to realize its full potential.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The formulation and evolution of India's national education policies have been extensively studied across academic, policy, and governmental domains. The literature highlights the policy responses to India's socio-economic transitions, colonial legacies, and global educational trends. This review draws from key scholarly contributions, government reports, and analytical commentaries to understand the conceptual, historical, and practical foundations of education policy in India.

1. The Kothari Commission and the NPE 1968

The Kothari Commission (1964–66) is often cited as the first comprehensive attempt to diagnose and prescribe a coherent strategy for Indian education. According to Tilak (2003), the Commission's recommendation for a common school system, equal access, and three-language formula marked a shift towards inclusive and culturally pluralistic education. The NPE 1968, drawing directly from the Commission, emphasized national integration, compulsory education, and teacher training—but scholars like Naik (1979) observed significant gaps between policy intentions and implementation.

2. Expansion and Equity in NPE 1986 (Revised 1992)

The 1986 Policy (and its 1992 Programme of Action) shifted the focus toward universal elementary education (UEE), adult literacy, and women's empowerment through education. Govinda and Diwan (2003) argue that while the policy advocated for decentralization and non-formal education, the centralization of decision-making often hindered grassroots-level execution. Moreover, the introduction of Operation Blackboard and District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) made significant strides, but their effectiveness varied regionally due to disparities in resource allocation and local governance.

3. Critical Perspectives on Educational Policy

Scholars like Kumar (2005) have critiqued the elitist orientation of policy frameworks and the failure to address systemic inequalities such as caste, gender, and rural-urban divides. Apple (2012) and Batra (2009) raise concerns about the

increasing commodification and privatization of education under policy regimes that emphasize performance, rankings, and international competitiveness over equity and inclusion.

4. The National Education Policy 2020

The NEP 2020 has sparked a new wave of scholarly interest. As per Menon (2021), the policy's emphasis on early childhood care, experiential learning, and multilingual education is aligned with global best practices. However, Jain and Sahni (2021) highlight the challenges of execution, especially in terms of teacher preparedness, digital divides, and funding constraints. While the policy promotes a liberalized curriculum and holistic assessment, the actualization of these reforms remains uneven across states.

5. Comparative and Global Contexts

International comparisons, such as those by UNESCO (2020), suggest that India's policy aspirations under NEP 2020 reflect a broader shift toward competency-based education, life-long learning, and sustainable development goals (SDGs). However, India's vast demographic diversity and federal governance structure pose unique implementation challenges not always captured in global models.

METHODOLOGY

Program of Action (POA) 1992

The 1986 National Policy on Education was modified once in 1992 by the P. V. Narasimha Rao government and in 2005, and later in 2004 by the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Programme of Action (PoA) 1992 brought about the Universalization of Elementary Education – UEE, expansion of secondary education, opening of Navodaya Vidyalayas and the conducting of a common entrance examination on all India basis for admission to professional and technical

programmes in the country, and accordingly Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and All India Engineering Entrance Examinations (AIEEE) at the National level and the State Level Engineering Entrance Examinations (SLEEE) have been organized for maintenance of professional standards across the country.

Despite the vision of a more student-centric learning environment, POA 1992 did not suggest any concrete steps to help with this goal. It did not highlight the changes needed in the textbooks, pedagogies, and teacher training to create a more learner-centric schooling system. Even at the university level, there was no proper planning shared for resource mobilization as suggested in the POA. And once again funds mattered and these policies could not be 100% successful.

Modifications of Program of Action in 2005 The Common Minimum Programme is a document outlining the minimum objectives of a coalition government of UPA in India during 2004. The document has acquired prominence since coalition governments have become the norm in India. In 2005, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh adopted the 'Common Minimum Programme' which coined the idea of conducting one common entrance examination on all India bases for admission to professional and technical programmes in the country. To fully empower women politically, educationally, economically and legally and to provide for full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and religious minorities was given utmost importance in the modification during 2005.

National Education Policy 2020

New Policy was introduced because the results of a survey conducted by NCERT, supported by the Union Ministry of Education was done that showed, students across 12 states scored significantly below the national average in mathematics ability. National Achievement Survey (NAS) is a nationally representative large-scale survey of students' learning undertaken by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. NAS gives a system-level reflection on effectiveness of school education and identifies learning as a big challenge facing Indian education. A committee of nine-member submitted the draft of the New Education Policy (NEP) in 2019, which was approved by the Union cabinet in July 2020. It recommended greater autonomy for higher education institutions and an increase in the national annual outlay for education to 6 per cent of GDP.

Accordingly, in 2019, the Ministry of Human Resource Development released a Draft New Education Policy 2019, which was followed by a number of public consultations. A Committee led by Dr K. Kasturirangan presented New Draft of National Education Policy. The Draft Policy is built on the foundational pillars of Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability & Accountability. It discusses reducing curriculum content to enhance essential learning, critical thinking and more holistic experiential, discussion-based and analysis-based learning. It also talks about a revision of the curriculum and pedagogical structure from a 10+2 system to a 5+3+3+4 system design in an effort to optimise learning for students based on cognitive development of children.

On 29 July 2020, the cabinet approved a new National Education Policy with an aim to introduce several changes to the

existing Indian education system, which will be introduced in India till 2026.

Salient Features of National Policy on Education 2020:

1. Extension of the Right to Education (RTE) Act: RTE, which currently applies to classes I to VIII, will now be applicable to the entire school system from pre-school to class XII. It will cover children of ages 3 to 18 (preschool to senior secondary level).

2. Sanskrit at all levels of education: Sanskrit should be taught at all levels of school and higher education as one of the optional languages on par with all Schedule 8 languages. Sanskrit textbooks at the Foundational and Middle school level may be rewritten in Simple Standard Sanskrit (SSS) in order to teach Sanskrit through Sanskrit (STS).

3. Restructuring of school curriculum and 5+3+3+4 design: The 10+2 structure of school curricula will be replaced by a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure corresponding to ages 3-8, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-18 years respectively. The new system will have 12 years of schooling with three years of Anganwadi or pre-schooling; So schools will be re-organized into school complexes. Under the proposed 5+3+3+4 design:

- The first five years of schooling of children in the age group of 3 to 8 years would be marked as Foundational Stage (it includes three years of pre-primary plus grade 1 and grade 2).
- The next three years of schooling, to be marked as a Preparatory Stage for the children in the age group of 8 to 11 years (will include grades 3 to 5).
- Middle Stage (grades 6 to 8) for the students in the age group of 11-14 years.
- Secondary Stage (Grades 9-12) for students in the age group of 14-18 years.

4. System for flexible and multiple board examinations: Introduction of a semester system in school education for students of classes 10 to 12, with provisions for holding "flexible and modular board examinations". Students will be able to take a board examination in a given subject in whichever semester they take the corresponding class in school, whenever they feel most ready. They should be able to take any such subject board examination again if they feel they can study and do better. Board exams will be based on knowledge application.

5. Home language, mother tongue or regional languages are going to be used as a medium of instruction up to class 5.

6. School curriculum will be reduced to core concepts; integration of vocational education from class 6.

7. Common entrance exams will be conducted for admission to universities and higher education institutions.

8. Restructuring of the higher education institutions: by placing them under three categories:

- The first primarily being focussed on research.
- Second providing high-quality teaching across disciplines with significant contribution to research.
- Third providing quality teaching focussed on undergraduate education.

9. Multiple Exit options in Higher Education: It also suggests the introduction of four-year undergraduate programmes in higher education institutions and restructuring of the current 3- year B.A., B.Sc., B. Com. and B. Voc. programmes with provisions to provide students with "multiple exit and entry options".

10. Establishment of a Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog (National Education Commission): It is a constitutional body through an Act

of Parliament, with the Prime Minister being its Chairperson.

11. Rajya Shiksha Ayog/State Education Commissions may be constituted in each state.

12. Establishment of one higher education regulator—National Higher Education Regulatory Authority (NHERA)— that will subsume all other bodies like UGC, AICTE and others into it. All higher education institutions, except legal and medical colleges, will be governed by a single regulator.

13. Common norms have been placed for private and public higher education institutions.

14. MPhil courses have been discontinued.

15. A national programme for the professional development of faculty members of the higher education institutions.

16. A regulatory body called -- National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT) has been set up to use technology for better learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of India's national education policies—from the foundational frameworks of 1968 and 1986 to the ambitious overhaul envisioned in the National Education Policy 2020—reflects a continuous effort to align the education system with the country's developmental goals and global trends. Each policy, while rooted in the socio-economic realities of its time, aimed to address persistent challenges of access, equity, quality, and relevance in Indian education.

The review reveals that earlier policies laid the groundwork for mass education and literacy, but often struggled with issues of centralized governance, lack of resources, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. The NEP 2020 stands out for its

transformative vision, promoting multidisciplinary learning, flexible curricula, vocational integration, and digital inclusion, while also seeking to redefine the role of teachers, pedagogy, and assessment methods.

However, as with previous policies, the success of NEP 2020 will rest heavily on effective implementation. Key challenges include disparities between urban and rural education systems, the digital divide, teacher training infrastructure, and consistent state-level execution. Without addressing these practical constraints, the policy risks becoming aspirational rather than actionable.

In conclusion, while India's education policies have evolved significantly in their philosophical depth and strategic ambition, the gap between policy intent and implementation outcomes continues to be a major concern. Moving forward, greater decentralization, increased funding, community participation, and technology-enabled monitoring will be crucial for realizing the transformative potential of NEP 2020 and achieving the broader vision of inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all.

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