



Transforming School Education through NEP 2020: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) focuses on ensuring easy access, equity, quality, and accountability in school education for all learners. It emphasizes providing equitable access for students with a strong focus on early childhood care and education (ECCE). School education needs improvement through pedagogical reforms and curriculum redesign, supported by assessment reforms and benchmarking standards to evaluate student learning. Teacher education and professional development are key, particularly through induction training for teachers. NEP 2020 also highlights the importance of educational technology and digital infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to devices and learning materials. As education is a concurrent subject in India, both central and state responsibilities are considered. Successful NEP 2020 implementation requires coordination among stakeholders and government commitment to societal and economic goals.

Keywords: National Education Policy, school education, professional development, Teacher education.

1. Introduction

Education in India is experiencing significant changes alongside developments in health, agriculture, and technology, influenced by urbanization and globalization. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, promoting a holistic educational approach. NEP 2020 emphasizes seven pillars for school education: access, equity, quality, affordability, skill enhancement, digital technology, and local culture. These pillars aim for universal access, holistic child development, and alignment with 21st-century needs. However, the current educational structure faces critical issues, raising doubts about previous policies and highlighting the need to reassess education systems, especially in schools. Although education was made a fundamental right in 2002 and was reinforced by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2009, reforms have been inadequate.

Additionally, the lack of a National Education Policy from 1986 until 2020 has further complicated educational reforms in India. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)(Kumar Nag, 2022)

2. Historical and Policy Context

Systematic discourse on India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 indicates a significant transformation in the school education system, promoting reforms in early childhood education and enhancing access and teaching quality. The impact of prior policies, particularly the National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (1992, 2016), is evident in NEP 2020, which proposes a comprehensive overhaul of the education system. The slogan "Holistic and Multidisciplinary" encapsulates the policy's aim for a paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches. NEP 2020 aligns with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) set by UNESCO for equitable and inclusive education by 2030. Previous policies' limited focus necessitated a thorough policy, demonstrating the evolution towards making education more accessible and improving overall quality. NEP 2020 aims to create a 21st-century education system that meets contemporary needs and fosters a vibrant knowledge society through holistic education. The earlier National Policy on Education identified access, quality, and equity as key concerns. Additionally, a UNESCO report emphasizes examining education in light of the pandemic. The rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has influenced the creation and accessibility of educational knowledge, highlighting the need to investigate available resources that can enhance educational research. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)

3. Core Pillars of NEP 2020 in School Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant transformation in academic policy with an emphasis on digital education, a multilingual approach, and an early intervention strategy. The policy provides comprehensive guidelines for the school education sector designed to promote access, equity, and quality for all school-going children nationwide. The significant role of schools in students' educational and societal development is recognized, and a variety of approaches designed to address regional challenges and establish a world-class education system are recommended.

NEP 2020 marks a paradigm shift toward holistic and integrated learning. Fundamental concepts are to be taught alongside skill development in a multi-structure curriculum conducive to creative and critical thinking. The existing semester-based education system is to be replaced by an absolute grading system comprehensive enough to accommodate the socio-cultural backdrop of specific regions and schools. Public-private partnerships are encouraged, together with community and civil society support. The integration of educational institutions in the school education system is considered key to improving the quality of education. Textbooks, activity books, and other educational material for arts and crafts are to be developed along open-source lines in multiple languages. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)

3.1. Access, Equity, and Inclusion: The National Education Policy (NEP) aims for universal access to quality education, emphasizing access, equity, and inclusion. These principles start

with basic facilities for education and policies to reach every student, particularly addressing challenges faced by girls and women. UNESCO highlights that social norms around marriage and motherhood hinder girls' education. Policymakers must balance the retention of students in school longer with accommodating those who wish to graduate early. NEP 2020 prioritizes early childhood education, focusing on preschool and anganwadis, to assist children before formal schooling. Current policies operate in isolation, and the removal of the 10+2 structure prematurely pushes students into higher education paths without proper career guidance. Many students in Class 12 lack the insight to make informed decisions about their futures. NEP 2020 proposes a curricular framework that blends foundational skill development with diverse subject exposure. It calls for consensus and coherence among states to promote standards that serve national interests and acknowledges the impact of COVID-19 on learning assessments. (Ainscow, 2016)(Batra, 2021)

3.2. Early Childhood Care and Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends a curricular framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) covering the ages from birth to eight years. The first stage focuses on ages 0 to 3 years, when children experience rapid brain growth (Fatima Shirly Anitha & Narasimhan, 2021). During this period, early childhood care and education provide the stimuli that shape the child's development. Age-appropriate records of a child's strengths and learning gaps are to be maintained to facilitate referrals for potential disabilities, such as speech disorders or autism. The policy objectives are to provide quality early childhood education for all children, including those with special needs, and to restrict the role of the private sector.

The second phase of the curricular framework covers ages 3 to 8 years. Non-formal, play-based, and activity-based pre-school education is to be aligned with foundational literacy and numeracy preparation at the primary school stage. Multilingual education is to be promoted by instructing children in their mother tongue or local language until Grade 5 or 8. The NEP advocates recording learning trajectories from the pre-school stage for better transitions to the primary school (Vennam et al., 2009).

3.3. Pedagogical Reforms and Curriculum Redesign

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 signifies a paradigm shift, recognizing education as a fundamental right. It emphasizes Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for ages 3 to 6 and introduces second language learning from grade 1. NEP 2020 recommends limiting classes to 30 students under Centrally Sponsored Schemes within the Samagra Shiksha Programme, highlighting the necessity of adequate teacher vacancies and access to digital resources, as well as ensuring facilities for drinking water, girls' toilets, and free textbooks for universal access and quality education at the pre-primary level. It also addresses health, safety, nutrition, and social-emotional learning to bolster foundational literacy and numeracy. After-school initiatives like Balvatika (for ages 3 to 8) and the Value Based School Education Programme launched by the Samskriti Outreach Foundation utilize varied pedagogical strategies but remain underutilized,

hindering pedagogical reform. Curriculum design in India needs to move away from a uniform model to one that accommodates geographical, cultural, and community diversity. The Curricular Framework in NEP 2020 suggests a comprehensive National Curriculum Framework for various education levels, with drafts available for School Education, Teacher Education, and Early Childhood Care. The Centre is reviewing these frameworks, even as separate State Subject Laws allow local-language-only Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that do not conform to NEP 2020. (Batra, 2021)

3.4. Assessment Reforms and Academic Standards

The NEP 2020 perceives assessment as a vital engine for learning and recommends an overhaul of NEET and JEE with a considerable reduction in the number of entrance examinations through the establishment of a National Testing Agency (NTA) to be operated in a PPP mode. The MHRD would need to formulate guidelines in transforming the multiple-choice question patterns to objective-type questions with single and multiple correct options that allow for negative marking and dummy questions as well as subjective-type questions on various subjects that allow for cross-disciplinary applications. A provision for conducting the assessment in a National Language as per the knowledge of the student should also be encouraged to cater to holistic development across various schools and universities. An alternative delivery mode of conducting assessment through NEET and JEE via PhDs students should also be promoted through technology. Teaching and delivery through online media coupled with coaching at a reduced pricing could resume the very existence of NEET and JEE while empowering the vital attitude towards TEACHING and learning as an ENGINE of learning.

3.5. Teacher Education and Professional Development

Transforming teacher education to align with technological advancements is essential for sustainable development and improved learning outcomes. The education system must meet the needs of current and future teachers regarding these changes. Although national policies acknowledge the importance of reforming teacher education, actual implementation is lacking. A study in Punjab, Pakistan, using mixed methods, found that effective transformation requires a clear vision and a flexible reform process aligned with vision 2030 targets for economic growth. Teacher development, which includes enhancing teaching competencies, has been a key concern for policymakers. In Nepal, mandatory ten-month training was established in 1971, but government support for training programs has diminished. Consequently, pre-service programs have shifted focus toward academic content rather than professional preparation. Since the late 1980s, federally funded projects aimed at enhancing in-service training faced challenges, notably a shortage of qualified instructors. Currently, the pre-service training for lower-secondary teachers is inactive. Despite governmental emphasis on teacher development, policy implementation has been inconsistent since the mid-1980s. The withdrawal of training allowances has decreased incentives for further training, and financial limitations have hindered

the completion of mandated training for untrained teachers, obstructing the goal of achieving 100 percent trained teachers by 2015. (Saira Hamid, 2017)(N Shrestha, 2013)

3.6. Educational Technology and Digital Infrastructure

The National Education Policy (NEP) highlights the role of technology in enhancing access to quality educational resources and collaborative learning while fostering essential skills. India's surge in educational technology (EdTech) during and after COVID-19 has transformed teaching, assessment, and learning processes. Even as pandemic restrictions ease, EdTech remains a top priority in India's education strategy. The NEP aims to integrate EdTech tools across various educational sectors, from schools to adult education, proposing frameworks like the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) and National Digital Educational Architecture (NDEAR). These initiatives seek to create a more inclusive and decentralized education system that utilizes both online and offline resources. The NEP also promotes real-world learning environments, advocating for the unlearning of outdated behaviors from traditional education. By fostering collaborative learning and adaptive pedagogies, the NEP's focus on educational technology is timely and essential for transforming global education. (Bajpai et al., 2019)(Kumar Nag, 2022)

4. Opportunities Generated by NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to address past errors in school education and equip students with essential skills for a rapidly advancing 21st-century world, marked by technological changes, global competitiveness, and environmental issues. The policy focuses on access, equity, and inclusion, ensuring universal quality education and improved learning outcomes by tackling longstanding educational challenges. NEP proposes a concurrent approach for providing Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) while promoting a holistic, multidisciplinary school education by revising the curriculum. It underscores the significance of mother-tongue-based multilingual education, advocating that understanding the mother tongue at least until Grade 5, preferably Grade 8, is crucial for effective learning. The NEP calls for a shift in pedagogy and assessment to encourage creative thinking, holistic development, and rigorous self-assessment, while maintaining children's creativity and exploratory spirit. It emphasizes the importance of practical, relevant projects. With many schools being privately funded or community-operated, the NEP seeks to foster partnerships, allowing universities and the private sector to aid in content development and holistic educational support. Schools are encouraged to define missions that align with local needs, enabling tailored development paths to achieve autonomy within the NEP's broader vision. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)(Kumar Jena, 2021)

4.1. Universal Access and Improved Learning Outcomes

Class 10 and Class 8 students' learning outcomes remain poor despite progress in educational access and coverage. More than 50% of Class 8 students could not read a Class 2-level text, and about 44% of Class 10 students could not perform basic operations with fractions or decimals. The long-standing emphasis on enrollment and access has tended to overshadow education quality (Kumar Nag, 2022). At the foundation of NEP 2020's vision for education, therefore, lies

the twin objectives of ensuring that all children have access to education and that all students achieve desired learning outcomes (Bordoloi, 2011).

4.2. Multilingual and Inclusive Education

Language develops children's thinking and understanding. The curriculum aims to build competencies, and a multilingual education system enhances learning by allowing children to engage with knowledge in their home languages. This approach also increases their access to varied knowledge, facilitating communication and social interaction with diverse groups. Multilingual education helps children function effectively across cultural, ideological, and linguistic boundaries, improving cognitive skills and social abilities. Educational policies in India advocate for the inclusion of Indian languages, reflecting state interests in promoting multilingualism or linguistic homogeneity. The NEP 2020 plans to introduce a Foreign Language Programme starting in class 6, teaching foreign languages as vocational or academic subjects. Collaboration with international organizations is expected to enhance access to global language resources. Additionally, implementing a curriculum framework to monitor educational performance and providing language frameworks to agencies can further support multilingual proficiency in education. (Raj Devkota, 2018)(Daly & Sharma, 2018)(Nag, 2018)

4.3. Autonomy for Schools and Local Governance

The NEP 2020 aims for a vision of school education that is Holistic, Integrated, Enjoyable and Engaging – with a broad curricular and pedagogical structure that is flexible and Multidisciplinary. Flexibility and Multidisciplinarity – i.e., the freedom to choose subjects and areas of interest across disciplines – will be embedded into the system itself and facilitated through curricular and pedagogical reforms. Holistic development of learners mandates focus on multiple dimensions of human capabilities and a Cognitively Engaging environment that fosters curiosity, creativity and critical thinking. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is recognised as a critical foundation for all later learning, development, and well-being. For this, The NEP envisions the introduction of a new curricular structure known as the National Curricular Framework (NCF). Emphasis on vocational education will help to prepare learners for the competitive labour market of the future. All learners will have equal opportunity to participate in Non-Academic and Extra-Curricular Activities irrespective of their socio economic background. The digital divide will be bridged so that all learners have access to Electronic Resources and can enhance their learning through Educational Apps (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

4.4. Innovation in Pedagogy and Assessment

School education is crucial for a country's human capital, influencing opportunities, income, and social equity. The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a chance to leverage the demographic dividend and address economic challenges. It promotes universal access, improved learning outcomes, and inclusive education, while allowing greater autonomy in decision-making and innovative teaching methods that encourage critical thinking and creativity without heavy reliance on exams. The NEP aims to transform India's educational landscape and significantly

enhance learning, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Between 2017-22, the national Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for higher education rose from 26% to 28%, yet remained stagnant at around 10% for marginalized groups, obstructing the vision for a 5 trillion-dollar economy. A significant shift in school education policy is essential to confront these challenges and exploit new opportunities. It must cultivate skills for today's job market and instill 21st-century competencies for global competitiveness. The rapid evolution of technology necessitates an educational framework that encourages lifelong learning. Not meeting these standards risks limiting career opportunities and undermines the goal of a thriving economy. (Kumar Nag, 2022)(Hanif & Hamzah, 2019)

4.5. Public-Private and Community Partnerships

Public-private and community partnerships (PPCP) in education aim to leverage the potential of complementary strengths of diverse actors—government, private, and civil society—for policy implementation in ways that improve educational access, equity, quality, and service delivery (Khan, 2011). The flexibility of NEP 2020 permits a diversity of schools, including public, private, and not-for-profit, which invites participation by philanthropists and non-governmental organisations. Even education and training entities under the aegis of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship can collaborate to improve pedagogical innovation in school education (Lennox et al., 2021). Experience in Pakistan highlights that partnerships must address the concerns of the poor, uphold the principles of equity, and fit within broader complementary policies that strengthen all education sectors for positive outcomes.

5. Challenges and Implementation Gaps

Despite NEP 2020's potential, significant challenges in school education persist. Resource allocation for new initiatives is problematic, compounded by teacher shortages and competency development issues. Equity in access, the quality of education, and rural-urban disparities are pressing concerns, made worse by overlapping efforts from various education ministries. New curricular, pedagogical, and assessment frameworks face obstacles due to the rigidity of State councils. Access to quality educational technology is uneven, exacerbating the digital divide and hindering hybrid learning potential. Although policies aim for equitable education access, disparities, particularly in rural areas, remain severe. School availability has increased, yet many regions still lack secondary and higher secondary schools. Learning outcomes are stagnant, with rural children trailing urban peers in essential skills. Fixed curriculum expectations and inflexible assessment systems have maintained a tight convergence of curriculum and assessment, leaving high-quality materials for new frameworks unmet. The proposed National Assessment Centre, still in the planning stages, could provide a diverse assessment framework for literacy and numeracy. However, essential infrastructure for reliable broadband and electricity in schools is lacking. Non-digital content delivery methods also require more public attention. Expanding efforts for quality hybrid education access, especially through varied media, could enhance the effectiveness of existing digital initiatives. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)(Kumar Nag, 2022)

5.1. Resource Allocation and Funding Gaps

Impacts of NEP 2020 are contingent on multiple factors, especially resource allocation and funding. Budgetary inputs for school education have faced persistent shortfalls since 2014–15. Given India's fiscal constraints, private participation could generate substantial funding through PPP models, especially for multimodal and digital content, production of textbooks, teacher training, and also through librarian, coach, and laboratory assistant services. NEP 2020 encourages close collaboration for curricular materials and teacher training provision (Bajpai et al., 2008).

Funding for the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), urged in NEP 2020 and already addressed in the Finance Bill, would promote judicious use of public funds on converted and produced content, practical training, etc. NEP 2020 calls for immense expansion of the National Mission to Focus on Basic Literacy and Numeracy and Digital Infrastructure for School Education—attracting considerable economic, social, and environmental investment in the sector.

5.2. Teacher Shortages and Capacity Constraints

The existing national norms and policies in teacher education and their successful implementation can play a prominent role in teacher preparedness for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, indeed, the Nigeria of our dream. The consolidated education and training degree curricula with an acceptance of the professional and vocational status of the teaching profession following the commencement of a sustained nationwide training and retraining of teachers will address the capacity gap arising from both the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme and the veritable conduit of the quarterly Federal Government Capital Expenditure as the basic source of funding for Department of Teacher Education will provide opportunity for the review of the National Policy on Teacher Education which had apparently ceased to serve the purpose for which it was originally designed (Benard Festus et al., 2019).

The teacher, as one-holder of the various systemic change processes are lillyponded, the stakeholders in the educational sub-sector have also nonchalantly attended periodically to the review of document, teacher training appears, however, to remain an all-time expansion theme of utmost national or strategic interest, beyond the widely disclosed vision 20:2020 of shaping Nigerian education in the 21st century (Adolphus Okujagu, 2013).

5.3. Equity and Rural–Urban Disparities

Despite efforts for equitable education in India, the public schooling system from grades 1 to 12 still shows significant inequities across social dimensions like urban-rural, caste, and gender. Urban-rural gaps are clear in access, retention, learning outcomes, and quality. For example, over 50% of grade 3 children in rural areas cannot read grade 1 text, compared to about 10% in urban areas. A 2020 survey indicates that rural students have access to distance education (like television and online learning) two to three times less than urban students. Challenges for

disadvantaged groups (SC, ST, Muslim minorities) are severe, while the urban-rural divide remains a major concern for state policy. (Guo & Li, 2024)

5.4. Curriculum Convergence and Assessment Alignment

To realise the vision of NEP 2020, the curriculum shall be developed through a convergence of the NCERT framework and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) analysis, which will offer a roadmap for updating the syllabus, textbooks, and assessment systems (Batra, 2021). The new curriculum framework will also stipulate basic learning outcomes to ensure a smooth and effective transition from earlier schooling to the National Education Policy (NEP) approaches across various education levels.

Education is a major vehicle for social transformation, and analysis of the education system over decades has revealed that both colonial and post-colonial policies, practices, and structures have adversely impacted most people in the country. Curriculum frameworks like the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) serve as important counterpoints to the existing curriculum and open up possibilities to engage with still prevailing economic, social, gender, and environmental injustices.

5.5. Technology Access and Digital Divide

Technological advancements have transformed education. Computers and tablets facilitate access to learning materials and online courses. Nevertheless, the digital divide in India reduces opportunities for underprivileged students. Addressing barriers to access and digital readiness is critical to realizing the potential of educational technology (Kumar Nag, 2022). A 2021 report indicated that 827 million individuals in India lack access to the internet, and 820 million lack access to devices. Rural-urban disparities underpin the digital divide: only fifteen per cent of rural households have internet access compared to forty-two per cent of urban households. Mobile devices account for eighty-seven per cent of internet usage yet penetration is limited. As schools shifted to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of devices obstructed access to online learning materials, with mobile phones being the predominant instrument for remote education (Jafar et al., 2023). Digital equity remains vital to realize the objectives of NEP 2020, yet school closures exacerbated socio-economic and educational disparities.

6. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 covers a broad spectrum from early childhood to higher education, addressing various subjects from foundational literacy to vocational education in collaboration with state governments. School education, which comprises over 80% of institutions and serves more than 20 crore students, aligns with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and the 12th Five Year Plan of the Planning Commission. The policy prioritizes a shift from examination-centric models to improving quality in higher education, vocational education, early childhood care, innovative pedagogy, and assessment reforms. It emphasizes universal access to education, multilingual instruction, cultural inclusion, and support for students with special

needs. The NEP envisions increased autonomy for schools in curriculum development and aims for a public-private-community partnership in managing educational systems. It also promotes innovation in teaching and assessment approaches, moving towards experiential learning rather than rote memorization. Nonetheless, several challenges hinder effective implementation, including inadequate visioning and planning, resource allocation issues, a shortage of qualified teachers, and inequities between states, particularly among rural and urban areas. The alignment between curricular, pedagogical approaches, and assessments remains inconsistent, while efforts to synchronize public examination designs with competency-based testing are lacking. Access to technology for pedagogy and assessment is limited for nearly half the population, exacerbated by socio-economic disparities and technological limitations. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)(Kumar Nag, 2022)

7. Case Studies and Comparative Perspectives

Major milestones in global education reform address significant challenges, particularly in India, which has a vast public education system with substantial quality variation. Quality perception is less clear than the concept of universal education. Current Indian educational policies prioritize universal access, aiming to transition toward quality education. Despite numerous post-independence initiatives and considerable government investment, India struggles with issues like poor educational quality, teacher absenteeism, inadequate infrastructure, misaligned teacher training curricula, and ineffective examination processes. Various systemic and teacher-focused initiatives are being implemented to improve educational quality, yet disparities and access restrictions persist. Education is crucial for enabling capabilities in sectors like information technology and infrastructure development. To meet growing demands for quality education, efforts include continuous professional development through distance learning in Government Colleges of Education, addressing the training gaps for 200,000 new recruits. Additional measures such as examinations for government school teachers and the establishment of a Teachers Training Commission aim to support the training of 840,000 new recruits as outlined in government policy. (Bajaj, 2014)(Batra, 2021) .

8. Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to transform India's school education, addressing longstanding challenges for the first time in three decades. It promotes equitable access to quality education, enhances creativity, and nurtures critical thinking. The NEP emphasizes a holistic approach, focusing on physical, mental, and emotional well-being, while encouraging autonomy for schools and decentralization within the education system. It fosters collaboration between the private and public sectors, as well as innovative partnerships with communities. The policy highlights foundational learning, multilingualism, and inclusivity, emphasizing the use of educational technology to improve teaching and school management. Urgent measures are recommended to ensure universal access and support socio-economically disadvantaged groups, with a strong focus on early childhood education and reducing dropout

rates, particularly among girls from low-income families. (Aithal & Aithal, 2019)(Kumar Nag, 2022)

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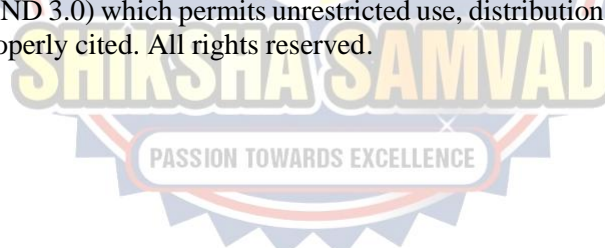
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