

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: MAJOR SHIFTS AND PROMINENT QUESTIONS

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with its vision to introduce an 'education system rooted in Indian ethos' in a country which would lead to its transformation into an 'equitable and vibrant knowledge society', aims to bring significant scale changes in the Indian education sector. The Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy (NEP), constituted under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in October 2015, had submitted its report on May 7, 2016.

After some protest, another committee had been formed under the chairmanship of Dr K. Kasturirangan; the committee submitted its report on May 31 2019. The report was itself a product of much deliberation, and extensive discourse involving various stakeholders surrounded the report after it was published. Subsequently, a much shorter overview of the report was published by the government. On July 30, India got a new education policy after 34 years by the approval of the cabinet.

The NEP 2020 has garnered considerable attention from the media and civil society. This article attempts to contribute to the discourse by discussing in detail some of the themes presented in the document, which holds the potential to radically change the field of education in India. The provisions related to them have already become subjects of much praise, speculation and criticism. However, a thorough understanding of their advent, meaning and possible effects post-implementation is required.

Previous Education Policies

The NEP 2020 takes cognisance of the different education policies which have already shaped the nation. For a comprehensive understanding of the policy, it is important that we look back at the preceding education policies of India. Indeed, many of its provisions are in tandem with provisions mentioned in the previous policies. While certain issues like inequality in education, lack of adequate infrastructure, and insufficiency of vocational education find repeated mentions

throughout the policies, displaying the deep-rooted nature of those problems and the fact that pragmatic solutions to these problems remain unfounded still, and provisions regarding other issues like nurturing a 'socialist' society, conducting examinations, or advancing secularism, have a reduced presence in later policies.

The National Policy on Education 1968, though only 8- pages in size and quite limited in details, also aimed for 'a radical reconstruction of education' for realising the ideal of a 'socialistic pattern of society'. It visualised free and compulsory education for all students up to the age of 14. It highlighted the importance of teachers in the sector of education and the nation as a whole. An interesting point to note is that a separate clause (2b) had been dedicated to highlight the importance and ensure the academic freedom of teachers, and their right to express opinions about significant national and international issues. The roots of important ideas of school complexes of NEP can be found in the concept of 'common school system' mentioned in the National Policy on Education. NPE 1968, like the NEP, lays considerable importance on the preservation and development of regional languages, but over and above, NEP also calls for special efforts for the development of Hindi as the 'link language' of India. It has basic provisions regarding the equalisation of educational opportunity among regions, social classes, genders, etc., and emphasises on the expansion of education on agriculture and industries. The document, like the NEP, acknowledges the benefits of a uniform educational structure and calls for the adoption of a 10+2+3 system across India.

The National Policy of Education 1986 draws upon the education policy of 1968 but says that many of its general formulations did not get translated into 'detailed strategy of implementations'. Like the NEP 2019, the NPE 1968 calls for differentiating the first five years of schooling, as primary (called foundational), and has provisions for Early Childhood Care and Education, a subject which gets much attention in the NEP. Translation of books into the various regional languages and the importance of education for the unity of India was emphasised even in 1986. There are provisions for Open University and Distance Learning in the 1986 policy and point 3.11 says that various groups like housewives, agricultural and industrial workers will be provided 'education of their choice, at a pace suited to them'. These attempts towards freeing education from closed classrooms became an essential theme of the NEP. The document makes special provisions for the education of women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, minorities and

the disabled. It is the 1986 policy that kickstarted the essential Operation Blackboard, which brought about massive changes in classroom infrastructure across India. It calls for a child-centred approach to be followed in schools, like the NEP, and its focus on Non-Formal education in an attempt to bring back drop-outs finds clear resonance in the NEP. This document too, encouraged autonomy in higher education and envisioned 'increasing flexibility in the combination of courses'. While in-service teacher education finds mention in the 1968 policy also, the NPE 1986 makes more detailed provisions. It establishes the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) for pre-service and in-service education of teachers.

The NPE 1986 is very different from the NPE 1968 in the sense that it also addresses the administrative issues surrounding education in India. However, neither of them contains detailed plans which can be implemented on the ground to achieve the objectives highlighted in them. The Programme on Action 1992 addresses this issue. It provides practical steps to materialise the provisions of NPE 1986. Both the 1968 and 1986 policy said that an essential aim of education in India is building a 'socialist pattern of society'. Interestingly, the words 'socialism' or 'socialist' finds no mention in the NEP 2020. Similarly, the 1968 and 1986 policies stress on the importance of the development of secularist ideals through education on multiple occasions. Still, the words 'secularism' or 'secular' find no mention in the newest document.

School Complexes and School Mergers

Sustained governmental efforts through Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (later subsumed under Samagra Sikhsha Scheme) have ensured near-universal access to schools in India. However, this has also meant the building up and maintenance of thousands of small schools, with very few students and teachers. The NEP cites U-DISE 2016–17 data, according to which nearly 28% of India's public primary schools and 14.8% of India's upper primary schools have less than 30 students. The average number of students per grade in the elementary schooling system (primary and upper primary, i.e., Grades 1–8) is about 14, with a notable proportion having below 6. During the year 2016–17, there were 1,08,017 single-teacher schools, the majority of them (85,743) being primary schools serving Grades 1–5. Small schools are financially and administratively difficult to manage. They make infrastructural up-gradation difficult, and the students of these small schools mostly lack access to laboratories, sports grounds and other necessary resources. Often a single teacher has to teach multiple classes and many subjects, even subjects he/she has

no background in. The NEP recognises these problems in section 7, and goes forward to recommend steps like 'consolidation of schools' (Pt. 7.4), and 'school complexes/clusters' (Pt. 7.6) to solve the problem. A more detailed understanding of these recommendations can be received if we take a look at the Draft NEP 2019 (the report of the committee).

'School Consolidation' refers to closing down small schools with very few students and merging them with nearby, possibly larger schools. Both the draft and the passed NEP calls upon authorities to ensure that school consolidation doesn't adversely affect the accessibility of schools. 'School complexes/clusters' are created by administratively linking several primary schools and a secondary school(s) in an area. The complex/cluster can also include vocational education institutes, Anganwadi centres, and other related institutions. The schools in a complex share resource like teachers, playgrounds, laboratories, counsellors, etc., ensuring that they are accessible to a larger number of students. They function under the school complex management committee and draw up collective plans for themselves. For improved governance, the NEP recommends devolving all finer decisions to Principals, teachers, and other stakeholders within each group of schools and treating such groups of schools as integrated semi-autonomous units. School consolidation and school complexes allow the vibrant teacher community to develop within which knowledge sharing is possible, and the isolation of students in small schools is broken.

It must be realised that the idea of school complexes/clusters is not exactly new. An education committee first recommended school complexes in Maharashtra State in 1948. No action was taken, however, and in 1966 the recommendation was repeated by the Kothari Commission instituted by the national government. Some state governments responded in the late 1960s and early 1970s, though with different models and varying degrees of success. Complexes were created in Bihar, Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Haryana (Bray, 1987). In 1987, CBSE brought out a publication titled, "Freedom to learn and freedom to grow through Sahodaya School Complexes" (SSCs), which characterised "SSCs" as a voluntary association of schools in a given area who, through mutual choices, have agreed to come together for a systematic and system-wide renewal of the total educational process; after this, several school complexes were formed across India. Singhal (1983) scrutinised the functioning and effectiveness of school complexes in India and reported that they often bring in positive

changes. For the school complexes of Bihar, he said that supervision of teachers increased, which in turn improved teachers' punctuality and techniques, and had some impact on pupil achievement. Resources were used more efficiently, library books were used more frequently, laboratories shared, and teachers used as substitutes when colleagues were away. Singhal attributed the reduction of drop-out rates, increase in enrolment rates and improved student performances in some areas to the creation of school complexes.

According to Singhal, the complexes couldn't achieve their full potential due to the lack of political will and investment. While that might be resolved if the central government is dedicated to implementing the NEP, the lack of strong leadership within complexes was another shortcoming reported by Singhal. The lack of initiative and leadership from the heads of school complexes was also reported from Andhra Pradesh in 2019 (Varma, 2019). Considering the fact that the NEP wants to devolve more powers to the ones who manage school complexes hoping that it would bring better results (pt. 7.8), mechanisms must be built to ensure that the positions of power within school complexes are filled by able and responsible individuals. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the idea of a school complex depends on the efficient sharing of resources. Efficient sharing of resources can only take place among the schools of a school complex if they are well connected infrastructurally. Students will not be able to access the libraries and laboratories of partner schools if they can't reach them easily. Organising collective events and formation of the 'sense of a community' (Pt. 7.5 c) will be difficult if the schools grouped don't have proper roads connecting them.

School mergers have also taken place in India before, but with slightly negative impacts. From 2017-18, the government of Jharkhand embarked upon a journey to merge thousands of schools in the state, under NitiAyog's Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital in Education (SATH-E) project, and with help from the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). The move was met by stiff opposition from members of the civil society and the opposition parties who claimed that the policy would bring down enrolment rates. Even prominent MLAs from the ruling BJP protested against school mergers as they believed that due to the hilly terrain of the state, and the fact that several areas are affected by Naxalism, parents would be unwilling to send their children to schools if they aren't nearby. Furthermore, they feared that the abandoned school buildings would be used for anti-social activities (Chowdhury, 2018). Sustained public pressure

made the government modify its policy and ensure that the consent of parents is taken before merging schools more than 1 km apart (Edex, 2018). Several journalistic works reported cases of students who dropped out after their schools were merged with schools they can't regularly travel to (Choudhury 2019). School mergers became a major poll issue in the 2019 Jharkhand election, and the new ruling government has promised to open up closed schools.

Rao et. Al. in their 2017 study on school mergers in Telangana, Odisha and Rajasthan, found that despite government assurances that no child will be left behind, enrolments were negatively affected by school mergers. The harm was more severe for students belonging to marginalised communities like Dalits and Tribes. Furthermore, they didn't find any evidence of school mergers improving the quality of learning. Rather, the reality pointed otherwise as they often found an inadequate number of teachers taking classes in cramped classrooms. Another research on mergers in Rajasthan by Accountability Initiative found that school mergers have reduced enrolments of students from ST, SC and OBC communities by around 6 percent. The decline was way higher than the average 1.4 percent reduction of enrolment rates in non-merged schools during the same period (Bordoloi and Shukla, 2019). In point 7.5, the NEP calls upon state governments to 'rationalise' schools by 2025 by using 'innovative mechanisms'. It must be realised that due to the circumstantial diversity among different regions of India, for some states, the most rational thing to do would be not to rationalise schools at all.

The Language Policy

The NEP rightly identifies that children learn better if they are taught in their mother tongues. It also correctly proclaims that the diversity of India, in terms of its languages, is its wealth and that its many languages must be sustained and developed. It, therefore, recommends the medium of instruction in both public and private schools to be the 'home language/mother-tongue/local language/regional language' until 'until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond' (Pt. 4.11). There is little doubt that this focus on the medium of instruction has had to come about because a large number of schools in India have adopted English as the medium of instruction. One of their practices of forcing students to speak in English all the while they are in school, and even when they are in informal settings, is indeed deplorable. The practice attaches a false inferior status to the students' mother tongues which might negatively affect the students' sense of dignity and cultural pride. The Draft NEP 2019, while explaining the language policy

had correctly diagnosed the problem of 'the knowledge of English' becoming a structural barrier to upward social mobility (D. NEP 2019, Pg. 81).

However, when a change as significant as this is planned, specific questions must be asked. The interesting case of Uttar Pradesh must be taken into account. In 2017, the BJP led UP government decided to start 5000 state-run English medium primary schools. The previous Samajwadi Party-led government had started a few English medium schools, and they were very popular. The government realised the demand for English medium schools among parents and decided to cater to the same by transforming some of the Hindi medium primary schools into English medium ones (hindustantimes, 2017). Furthermore, in 2019, the UP government decided to set up 1000 English medium junior high schools as per the demands of parents and students who studied in English medium primary school (hindustantimes, 2019). Unless we assume that the assessments of the Uttar Pradesh government are horribly wrong, we must accept that making schools change their medium of instruction from English to local languages would go against the demands of many students and their parents.

We must also ask why students and parents are attracted to English medium schools. One answer might be what the Drat NEP had pointed out- the higher social status associated with the English (D. NEP 2019, Pg. 82). Parents want their children to gain that higher social status the knowledge of English brings with itself and avail the opportunities that come with it. Hence, they try to send their children to English medium schools. This throws light on another essential aspect which has been recently pointed out by several Dalit-Bahujan groups- unlike other structural barriers like economic wealth, caste or gender, English is presently one that can be easily dealt with in a sensitive manner. The knowledge of English is comparatively easier to gain, thanks to the schools offering English education. For many members of the marginalised communities, English can open doors to upward social mobility. Governmental steps to reduce the spread of English through schools might indeed turn English into a more rigid structural barrier. The affluent and privileged can still use 'the test of English' to discriminate as they can hire private tutors and take private classes to learn English; the fact that older generations in their family know English would also ensure that the new generations of the affluent and privileged know English. Still, English would become much more inaccessible to those who were seeking upward social mobility and can't afford the ways of the privileged.

Furthermore, we must accept the practical benefits of the knowledge of English. Of the 193 countries in the world, 67 have English as the primary language of official status; there are 27 more countries (including India) where English is spoken as a secondary official language (SGI, 2015). The knowledge of English allows cultural interaction and information sharing between Indians and all of these countries. The Draft NEP was correct in saying that English has not emerged as the 'international language' (pg. 82), but if we search for a dominant global language, first in the list would be English. The world is getting increasingly digitised, and the value of information is rising. A significant source of information in the current world is websites. W3Techs, a leading research organisation of the digital world, found that 52.9% of the top 10 million sites are in English (McCarthy, 2018). Most of the knowledge production in the world occurs in English. 21.84% (which is the biggest share) of books in the world are published in English, 62.55% of newspapers and magazines in the world are published in English, 45.24% of all scholarly journals in the world are published in English. English also dominates online video content- 34.89% of films and videos in the world are produced in English (Lobachev, 2008). This does not in any way mean that any of the Indian languages are inferior to English. However, it does mean that the knowledge of English allows individuals and the country as a whole to tap into this vast pool of resources at a minimal cost and that, is a huge benefit. Considering the fact that knowledge production occurs continuously, the information gets aged and less relevant at an extremely rapid pace in the current world. Translation technologies are not yet up to the mark. Thus, attempts to stop the spread of English in India seem unrealistic and worthlessly sentimental.

The NEP tactically accepts the need of English by its three-language formula, of which only two must be Indian (4.13) and it's not mentioning of English as one of the foreign languages one might learn as an 'extra' (Pt. 4.20). The makers of NEP, it seems, envisioned English being taught as a second language while the medium of instruction remains an Indian language. Whether that would lead to a forceful slowing down of the spread of English despite its demand and benefits is an open question.

The other concern that must be raised is how the language of instruction will be chosen in schools with students with a variety of mother tongues. We can take the example of Assam where a large number of Bengalis live along with the Assamese. The schools, especially in

Assam's cities, have students from both the linguistic communities along with students from other North Eastern and North Indian linguistic communities. Taking into consideration the political history of the region, choosing either Bengali or Assamese as a medium of instruction will stroke political controversy. Furthermore, suppose any one of those languages is imposed as the medium of instruction, then, a large number of students will end up not being instructed in their mother tongues, largely defeating the purpose of the policy. While implementing the language policy of the NEP, a large amount of flexibility might be necessary, because just like the diversity of languages, we have a vast diversity of circumstances surrounding them.

Flexibility and Multidisciplinary

The NEP 2020 strives to empower students by allowing them the flexibility to choose the subjects they want to study and to design their own course, starting from secondary school (Pt. 4.9). It intends to dissolve the hard barriers between the arts, science and commerce streams, and also those separating the 'curricular' from the 'extra-curricular' and 'co-curricular' and the 'vocational' from the 'academic'. It visualises an education system where students are free to explore and choose the subjects they like and thus, have higher chances in excelling in them. In the current scenario, schools impose a set of subjects with their preset content on students. Often certain students are not interested in one or more of those subjects, and they might not find themselves to be fit for them. They, therefore, have lower chances of performing as well as others in these subjects and as a result, their overall academic scores suffer. Many of these students, however, are interested and talented in other unoffered subjects, including the so-called extra-curricular/vocational subjects. The lack of opportunity to study the subjects they are interested in and the societal pressure to study the 'desirable' available subjects, is an injustice to them and a loss of resource for the nation. The NEP wants to break barriers and bring all subjects at par with each other. Students will, therefore, be free to try out different subjects, realise their abilities and interests, and hone their talents in the disciplines of their choosing. This will certainly make the learning experience more enjoyable and more productive for the students. Furthermore, this might be a step towards dissolving the socially attached higher and lower statuses to specific subjects, something that has forced students to go against their wishes and study what the society wanted them to study for too long.

A few concerns remain, however. Something that must be kept in mind is that we are talking about minors choosing their subjects. Considering the social realities of India, there is a high probability that very often the parents of the students would decide for the students, undermining their own choices, and being influenced by the socially attached high and low status to subjects. Furthermore, the vision of students having a large pool of subjects to choose from might almost always remain unrealised on the ground. CBSE currently offers 91 non-language academic items to choose from, including Home Science, Early Childhood Education, Salesmanship, and Entrepreneurship (CBSE, 2019). However, very few students have the opportunity to choose from among these 91 subjects as the subjects they are going to study is dictated by the subjects that are offered in their schools. We must understand that few schools in India have the infrastructural and economic capability to hire teachers and provide classrooms for a large number of subjects and students will mostly have to choose from among the few subjects offered in their schools.

The NEP aims to make all Higher Education Institutes in India multidisciplinary, meaning they would impart lessons on a wide variety of disciplines. The students in these universities would, therefore, have a wide range of interests, outlooks and passions, and the mutual interaction among them would be educative and beneficial. Also, the NEP wants to allow university students to choose subjects across disciplines and thus get a multidisciplinary education. With the Industrial Revolution, the demand for specialised education for the newly created specialised jobs grew, and with that grew the distance between disciplines. Some educators like Charles Eliot, who played a crucial role in the development of the "liberal arts education", expressed doubts about the increasing differentiation among disciplines. He believed that students after they have attained the age of eighteen, should not be forced to follow pre-designed pathways under the guise of specialisation in disciplines, they should be free to choose the subjects in which they want to be educated (Zakaira, 2016). He also believed that the hard separation of disciplines reduces the chances of positive social change, as it reduces interaction between the different disciplines and the evolution of new modes of thinking (Jones, 2012).

Furthermore, since the experience of university education often radically changes the outlook and thinking of students, it is difficult to understand how it can be assumed that students will know beforehand which exact discipline to be trained in (Misiewicz, 2017). With the ongoing

technological revolution, it has become complicated to predict which specialised skills will be in demand in the economy in the near future, and the ability to upgrade and reskill has become paramount. Reskilling and learning anew becomes more comfortable when a multifaceted and multidisciplinary understanding of the world around is achieved instead of straightforward, rigorous specialisations. Education in singular disciplines trains students to look at the world only through the eyes of that specific discipline. Multidisciplinary, by allowing students to understand the various outlooks of different disciplines, helps them gain a more wholesome understanding of the world, and in turn, facilitates the formulation of better solutions for its problems.

Vocational Education

India, with regard to population, is one of the youngest nations in the world with about 62% of its population in the working-age group (15-59 years), and around 54% of its total population below 25 years of age. Its population pyramid is expected to bulge across the 15-59 age group over the next decade. Under such circumstances, our country presently faces a dual challenge of scarcity of highly trained workforce as well as non-employability of large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess little or no job skills. The country has a big challenge ahead as it is estimated that only 4.69% of the total workforce in India has undergone formal skill training (NSSO, 2011-12) as compared to 68% in the UK, 75% in Germany, 52% in the USA, 80% in Japan, and 96% in South Korea. According to the NCAER Skilling India Report published in 2018, nearly 1.25 million new workers aged 15–29 are projected to join the workforce every month through 2022. The roughly 70 million workers who are entering or have entered the workforce between 2018 and 2022 need to be skilled for a 21st-century economy if India is to keep pace with technological change. Furthermore, many of the roughly 468 million workers currently in the workforce could be upskilled and reskilled, which is not easy because 92% are in the informal sector. Out of the more than 500 thousand final year bachelors students aged 18–29 who were surveyed by NCAER, 54% were found to be unemployable, pointing out the massive prevalent skill gap.

India is currently in a unique position where both the employers are seeking skilled workers, and the ones that are seeking employment are facing problems. A 2011 survey on 'Labour/ Skill Shortage for Industry' of over 100 companies by the Federation of Indian Chambers of

Commerce and Industry (FICCI) found that 90% of companies were facing a labour shortage. On the other hand, in its Efficiency Study Report on Indian ITIs, the International Labour Organization (ILO) concluded that the employability of those completing training at state-run ITIs was poor and that only 30–40% found employment or became self-employed on completion of their training (ILO, 2003, p. 31). Under such circumstances, the development and improvement of the vocational education sector in India is essential.

As a response, the NEP firstly calls upon dissolving the hard separation between 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects in schools (Pt. 4.9). It makes way for students to attain vocational skills while studying other 'academic' subjects in schools. It also plans to introduce 'bagless days/weeks' in schools where all students will be involved in hands-on vocational activities and create opportunities to intern with local craftsmen and vocational experts for students (Pt. 4.26). The policy also visualises multidisciplinary higher education institutes providing vocational education courses along with other 'mainstream' subjects (Pt. 16.5). The NEP points out the fact that vocational education is seen as inferior to mainstream academic education in India, and students are often discouraged from enrolling in vocational courses. The above-mentioned steps of breaking the barriers between 'academic' and 'vocational' would help in raising the social status of vocational courses. The NEP also creates clear academic pathways for students of vocational education and allows vertical mobility for them.

The NEP says that by 2025 at least 50% of Indian learners will have exposure to vocational education (Pt 16.5). While simply 'exposing' 50% of students to vocational education might not be a tough task to achieve, training 50% of students properly with the available infrastructure might be so. There is an urgent requirement to close the prevalent skill gap in India, i.e. train students in vocations which are in demand in the economy. The quality of vocational education teachers and skill imparters also need to be improved. Both of these must be an essential part of the 'reimagination of vocational education' called upon by the NEP. There is some confusion regarding how much skill training can be imparted to children in schools, keeping their safety and health in mind. Many groups have also pointed out the importance of ensuring that converging vocational with academic education doesn't lead to further structural discrimination of the marginalised. While strengthening the vocational education sector of India, the

government must ensure that students from marginalised communities are not discouraged from joining the educational institutes offering non-vocational courses.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 has a vast potential to change. Whether or not it will be a change for improvement largely depends on its implementation. Education being a subject of the concurrent list, the implementation would rely heavily on the decisions and actions of particular state governments. This is, indeed, necessary because the educational scenario is very different across the different regions of India. Also, this is in tandem with NEP's support for decentralisation- in the form of more autonomy to educational institutes and engaging local community members in education to teach content with 'local' flavour. While the policy has been made, the dialogue about it is still ongoing. The impact of the policy on the ground would depend on the results of that dialogue, the negotiations between the population and the government agencies and the particular circumstances on the ground.

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