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Comparative study of NEP 2020 and previous education policies in India

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Abstract

India's education system has undergone several policy reforms since independence, with major national policies introduced in 1968, 1986 (modified in 1992), and most recently, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Each policy reflected the socio-economic aspirations and developmental priorities of its time. This paper undertakes a comparative study of NEP 2020 and earlier education policies to understand their foundational objectives, structural reforms, pedagogical approaches, and implementation strategies. NEP 2020 marks a significant shift from earlier frameworks by promoting holistic, multidisciplinary, and skill-based education with a focus on digital literacy, competency-based learning, and inclusive access.

The study highlights key differences such as NEP 2020's emphasis on early childhood care, foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), technology integration, and the restructuring of school and higher education formats. At the same time, it draws attention to the continuity in policy goals like equity, access, and quality. The paper also critically examines how the challenges faced by earlier policies—such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and uneven implementation—remain relevant today. By analyzing these continuities and transformations, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of India's evolving educational vision.

Keywords: National education policy 2020, education policy 1986, education policy 1968, educational reforms, comparative study, holistic learning, teacher development, curriculum restructuring, policy implementation, Indian education system

1. Introduction

Education has consistently been one of the most significant pillars of India's national development strategy. Recognizing the transformative power of education in shaping a just, inclusive, and knowledge-driven society, successive governments since independence have taken deliberate steps to design and implement comprehensive education policies. These policies are intended to not only expand educational access but also improve quality, equity, and relevance in the context of the nation's socio-economic growth and global standing. Over the decades, three major policy documents have served as the foundation for the direction and reform of education in India: the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968, NPE 1986 (revised in 1992), and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The NPE 1968 was the first education policy post-independence, formulated in response to the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66). It emphasized the need for a common school system,

promotion of regional languages, and equal opportunities in education, especially for underprivileged and marginalized groups. It aimed to establish a national framework that would ensure uniformity while respecting the diverse linguistic and cultural fabric of India. The NPE 1986, which was later modified in 1992, introduced more structural changes. It focused on universalizing elementary education, improving adult literacy, supporting women's education, and enhancing the quality of teachers and teaching methods. It also highlighted the importance of vocational education and technology in schooling, marking a shift towards modernization and skill development.

However, despite their noble intentions, both the 1968 and 1986/92 policies struggled with implementation bottlenecks due to limited resources, uneven governance capacities across states, and persistent social inequalities. While access to education expanded significantly, challenges around learning outcomes, quality infrastructure, and teacher accountability persisted well into the 21st century.

In this context, the National Education Policy 2020 represents a landmark shift in India's educational vision. Coming after a gap of over three decades, NEP 2020 is ambitious in its scope and comprehensive in its recommendations. It seeks to prepare Indian learners for the demands of a rapidly evolving global knowledge economy by promoting 21st-century skills, technological integration, and multidisciplinary learning. The policy envisions a school education structure that transitions from the traditional 10+2 format to a 5+3+3+4 curricular model, thereby aligning more closely with the cognitive development stages of children. It places a strong emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), and competency-based assessments.

In higher education, NEP 2020 proposes sweeping reforms, including the multiple exit and entry options, the establishment of a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), the creation of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), and the development of an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). These reforms are designed to bring flexibility, innovation, and student choice to the forefront. Moreover, the policy encourages the integration of technology, online learning, and digital platforms such as DIKSHA, thereby acknowledging the changing landscape of education delivery.

NEP 2020 also places unprecedented importance on inclusivity and equity, focusing on bridging the digital divide, promoting education for disadvantaged groups, and ensuring that no child is left behind regardless of socio-economic background, gender, or region. It adopts a holistic approach that includes curriculum redesign, teacher training, governance reforms, and institutional autonomy, all within the framework of an Indian knowledge system that balances tradition and modernity.

Overall, NEP 2020 does not merely attempt to tweak the existing educational structure but seeks to transform it from the ground up. Its emphasis on flexibility, student-centric learning, and global standards sets it apart from its predecessors. However, understanding its true potential requires a comparative lens that examines how far it diverges from or builds upon the visions set by previous policies. This paper aims to provide that analysis by exploring the evolution of India's education policy framework from 1968 to 2020.

1.1 Need for a comparative study

A comparative analysis of NEP 2020 and previous policies is essential for several reasons:

- **Understanding Policy Evolution:** To trace how India's educational objectives have evolved over the decades.
- **Identifying Gaps and Continuities:** To see which goals have remained constant and which aspects have been newly introduced or reshaped.
- **Assessing Impact and Implementation:** To evaluate the lessons learned from past implementations and how NEP 2020 attempts to overcome earlier challenges.
- **Contextual Relevance:** To analyze how each policy responded to the socio-political and economic contexts of its time.

1.2 Objectives of the study

- To compare the key goals, features, and focus areas of NEP 2020 with the 1968 and 1986/1992 policies.
- To analyze structural, curricular, and pedagogical reforms proposed in each policy.
- To highlight challenges in the implementation of previous policies and how NEP 2020 addresses or inherits them.
- To evaluate the overall shift in India's educational vision from access and expansion to quality, flexibility, and innovation.

2. Review of Literature

A comprehensive review of the existing literature reveals a growing body of academic, policy, and institutional work aimed at analyzing India's evolving education policies. The literature offers critical insights into the objectives, implementation gaps, achievements, and challenges associated with the National Education Policies of 1968, 1986/92, and 2020. This section synthesizes key studies, government reports, and scholarly evaluations to establish a foundation for comparison.

2.1 National Policy on Education 1968

The National Policy on Education (1968) was based on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66), which emphasized education as an instrument of national development and social integration. According to Sharma (1970) ^[8], the policy aimed to promote a uniform educational structure across states while also prioritizing the teaching of regional languages and science. However, implementation suffered due to limited funding and weak central-state coordination. Scholars like Naik (1979) ^[7] pointed out that although the policy advocated for a common school system, this remained an unfulfilled ideal due to systemic inequality and resistance from private educational institutions.

2.2 National Policy on Education 1986/1992

The NPE 1986 (revised in 1992) marked a shift towards modernization, aiming to expand access to marginalized groups and integrate vocational and technical training. According to Govinda (2002) ^[3], this policy placed significant emphasis on universal elementary education, teacher training, adult education, and the empowerment of women. Tilak (2005) ^[9] noted that while the policy's vision was progressive, its effectiveness was hindered by a lack of decentralized planning and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. The Operation Blackboard scheme and District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) emerged from this policy, yet their long-term impact was uneven across regions, as documented by Mehrotra (2006) ^[5].

2.3 National Education Policy 2020

The NEP 2020 has generated substantial academic and policy discourse since its release. According to Kumar (2020), the policy represents a paradigm shift by emphasizing holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary education. It introduces innovative structures such as the 5+3+3+4 model, focuses on foundational literacy and

numeracy (FLN), and promotes digital learning platforms like DIKSHA. Varghese (2021) ^[10] argues that NEP 2020 rightly places autonomy and academic freedom at the heart of higher education reforms. However, several scholars including Bhattacharya (2021) ^[11] have raised concerns about the feasibility of implementation, especially in rural and underserved areas. Issues like digital inequality, infrastructure readiness, and the need for massive teacher upskilling remain significant barriers.

2.4 Comparative Analyses and Thematic Studies

Comparative studies such as those by Choudhary and Sharma (2022) ^[12] highlight the evolution of educational priorities—from basic literacy and access to 21st-century competencies and learner autonomy. These studies emphasize that while the goals of equity and inclusion remain consistent across all three policies, the strategies and emphasis areas have shifted over time. For instance, while NPE 1968 focused on language policy and science education, NEP 2020 emphasizes technology integration, multilingualism, and global competitiveness. Mishra and Pathak (2021) ^[6] argue that a historical understanding of past implementation failures is crucial to avoid repeating mistakes in executing NEP 2020.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design based on a comparative policy analysis approach. The research aims to critically examine and compare the National Education Policy 2020 with the earlier National Policies on Education of 1968 and 1986/92. The focus is on analyzing the vision, goals, structural reforms, pedagogical approaches, and implementation strategies outlined in the policy documents.

3.2 Data Sources

The study relies primarily on secondary data sources, including:

- Official government documents and publications of the respective National Education Policies (NPE 1968, NPE 1986/92, and NEP 2020).
- Reports and policy briefs published by the Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- Academic journal articles, books, and research papers analyzing the policies.
- Reports from educational research institutions, think tanks, and international organizations such as UNESCO.
- Media articles and expert commentaries relevant to the education policy context.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a systematic review of the above documents. Keywords such as “National Education Policy India,” “NPE 1968,” “NPE 1986,” “NEP 2020,” “education reforms India,” and “policy implementation challenges” were used to search digital academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and government portals.

3.4 Analytical Framework

A comparative thematic analysis was adopted to evaluate the policies. Key themes identified for comparison included:

- Policy Vision and Objectives
- Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms
- Structural Changes in School and Higher Education
- Teacher Education and Training
- Technology Integration
- Equity, Access, and Inclusion
- Governance and Implementation Strategies
- Challenges and Limitations

The content of each policy was examined under these themes, followed by a cross-policy comparison to identify shifts, continuities, and gaps.

3.5 Limitations

- The study is limited to secondary data analysis and does not include primary data collection such as interviews or surveys.
- The dynamic nature of policy implementation means that some recent developments or state-level variations may not be fully captured.
- The focus is on national-level policy documents; state-specific education policies and their alignment with NEP 2020 are outside the scope of this study.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The comparative analysis of the National Education Policies of 1968, 1986/92, and 2020 reveals significant shifts in educational priorities, structural reforms, and implementation strategies. This section discusses key themes emerging from the policy documents and related literature.

4.1 Policy Vision and Objectives

- NPE 1968 emphasized national integration, equalizing educational opportunities, and promoting scientific temper. It focused on expanding access, particularly for rural and disadvantaged groups, reflecting the developmental needs of a newly independent nation.
- NPE 1986/92 maintained these goals but introduced modernization, with greater focus on vocational education, adult literacy, and empowerment of women. It aimed to universalize elementary education by 2000 and improve the quality of teaching.
- NEP 2020 shifts towards a holistic vision, aiming to nurture creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. It integrates global competencies and digital literacy while emphasizing equity and inclusion in a multilingual and diverse society.

4.2 Structural Reforms in School Education

- The 1968 and 1986/92 policies followed a conventional 10+2 schooling system.
- NEP 2020 introduces a 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure, aligned with cognitive developmental stages from early childhood through secondary education. This structure addresses early childhood care and education, which was relatively neglected in previous policies.

4.3 Curriculum and Pedagogical Changes

- Earlier policies emphasized rote learning, uniform curriculum, and examination-oriented assessment.

- NEP 2020 advocates for a multidisciplinary, inquiry-based, and experiential learning approach. It calls for competency-based assessments, reducing the stress of high-stakes exams, and promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

4.4 Teacher Education and Training

- NPE 1986 recognized the importance of teacher training but lacked comprehensive mechanisms for ongoing professional development.
- NEP 2020 highlights continuous teacher development, enhanced recruitment standards, and professional autonomy. It also proposes a National Mission on Teacher Training with updated pedagogical tools and digital literacy.

4.5 Technology Integration

- The earlier policies mentioned technology in a limited capacity.
- NEP 2020 places significant emphasis on integrating technology across education levels, including digital learning platforms, online resources, and virtual labs, which is especially crucial post-pandemic to ensure learning continuity.

4.6 Equity and Inclusion

- While all three policies highlight equity and access, implementation gaps persisted, especially for marginalized communities.
- NEP 2020 explicitly addresses these gaps through targeted initiatives such as scholarships, flexible curricula for differently-abled students, multilingual education, and bridging the digital divide.

4.7 Governance and Implementation

- Previous policies faced challenges like fragmented governance, funding shortages, and weak monitoring mechanisms.
- NEP 2020 proposes stronger governance reforms with institutional autonomy, creation of new regulatory bodies (like HECI for higher education), and a robust monitoring framework.

4.8 Challenges and Limitations

- Despite the progressive vision of NEP 2020, challenges remain in terms of infrastructure readiness, teacher preparedness, and digital inequality.
- The policy's success depends heavily on adequate funding, capacity building at state levels, and stakeholder engagement-issues that previous policies struggled with.

5. Discussion Summary

The comparative analysis demonstrates a clear evolution in India's education policy landscape-from a focus on access and expansion towards quality, flexibility, and learner-centric education. NEP 2020 reflects contemporary global trends while being sensitive to India's unique socio-cultural context. However, the policy's transformative potential hinges on effective and inclusive implementation.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study of the National Education Policies of 1968, 1986/92, and 2020 highlights the dynamic evolution of India's educational vision in response to changing societal needs, economic contexts, and global trends. The early policies primarily focused on expanding access and addressing literacy gaps in a newly independent nation, emphasizing equity and national integration. However, they were constrained by implementation challenges related to resource limitations, infrastructure, and governance inefficiencies.

The National Education Policy 2020 marks a significant paradigm shift by proposing a holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary framework designed to prepare learners for the demands of the 21st century. Its emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy, early childhood education, technology integration, and learner autonomy reflects a forward-looking approach grounded in inclusivity and quality. Moreover, the policy's restructuring of school education and reforms in higher education governance demonstrate an attempt to overcome the systemic limitations of previous frameworks.

Despite its comprehensive and visionary nature, the successful realization of NEP 2020's goals depends largely on effective implementation, which requires coordinated efforts among central and state governments, educational institutions, teachers, and communities. Challenges such as digital divides, teacher training needs, and infrastructure deficits must be addressed to translate policy aspirations into tangible outcomes.

In conclusion, NEP 2020 builds upon the lessons and legacies of earlier policies while offering a transformative blueprint for India's education system. Continued research, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement will be critical to ensuring that this policy fosters an inclusive, innovative, and resilient educational environment that supports the nation's development aspirations.

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