



## A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: TRACING THE THREADS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The National Education Policy 2020 represents the third major reform framework in India's post-independence educational journey. This paper traces the historical roots of this policy by examining how Indian education has evolved from the colonial period to the present. The analysis reveals that while NEP 2020 introduces genuinely novel elements—a restructured school system, flexible college pathways, and a reoriented approach to student assessment—it also inherits unresolved questions that have troubled Indian education for decades. These persistent challenges include the contentious implementation of the three-language formula, the enduring gap between spending targets and actual budgetary allocation, and the delicate balancing act between central vision and state autonomy in a federal system. By placing NEP 2020 within this longer historical trajectory, the paper argues that the policy is less a dramatic rupture with the past than a reconfiguration of long-standing tensions. Understanding these continuities is essential for realistically assessing what the policy might achieve.*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

On 29 July 2020, the Government of India gave its approval to a document that would replace the framework guiding Indian education for more than thirty years. The 1986 National Policy on Education, along with its 1992 Programme of Action, had shaped schooling and higher education across the country since the late twentieth century. The new policy arrived with considerable ambition. Its opening pages spoke of transforming India into "an equitable and vibrant knowledge society" and positioning the country as a "global knowledge superpower." Yet no policy document emerges from a vacuum. Every education policy carries the weight of what came before—the commissions, the reports, the public debates, and the political compromises that shaped earlier visions. The questions that vexed policymakers in 1968 remain remarkably alive in 2020. How does one balance regional languages against the perceived need for a national link language? How does one make quality education accessible to all while keeping standards high? How does one fund grand aspirations with limited resources? This

paper explores the historical backdrop against which NEP 2020 was formulated. It asks three simple questions. What did earlier policies set out to accomplish? What has shifted in the new framework? And what unresolved problems has the new policy inherited from its predecessors? The goal is not to pronounce the policy as a success or a failure but to understand it as part of an ongoing national conversation about what Indian education should be and whom it ought to serve.

## **2. THE COLONIAL INHERITANCE:**

To grasp the challenges facing Indian education policy, one must first understand the system that independence sought to replace. British rule left behind an educational apparatus that was never designed to serve the Indian population as a whole. In his famous Minute on Education of 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay argued that the objective of British education in India should be to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." This was not a blueprint for mass schooling. It was a plan for producing clerks, translators, and minor administrators who could help run an empire. The Despatch of 1854, often called Wood's Despatch, established a more structured system with primary schools, secondary schools, and universities in the major cities. But the curriculum remained overwhelmingly Western in content, and English remained the medium of instruction. This ensured that education remained accessible only to a small section of society. When India gained independence in 1947, only about 12 percent of the population was literate. The system the new nation inherited was narrow in its reach, elitist in its orientation, and shaped at every level by colonial priorities. This inheritance shaped everything that followed. Every post-independence education policy has had to grapple with the same fundamental question. How does a newly independent country build an education system that serves its own people, respects its own intellectual traditions, and yet prepares its citizens for a world in which English and Western knowledge still carry enormous power?

## **3. THE FIRST NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION, 1968:**

India's first National Policy on Education came in 1968. It was built largely on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission, which had spent two years studying every aspect of Indian education. The commission's report, published in 1966, was a landmark document. It argued that education was not merely about individual advancement but about national development. It called for a "radical reconstruction" of the education system. The 1968 policy made several important commitments. It promised free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of fourteen. It endorsed the three-language formula, under which students would learn their regional language, Hindi, and English. It emphasised the importance of science education and the teaching of India's cultural heritage, including Sanskrit. And it set a target that would reappear in Indian policy documents for decades to come: spending on education should reach six percent of the national income.

#### 4. THE NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION, 1986:

By the mid-1980s, it had become clear that the 1968 policy had not achieved everything it had set out to do. The education system had expanded dramatically—there were many more schools, more teachers, and more students than in 1968—but the quality of education remained uneven. Dropout rates were high, especially among girls and children from disadvantaged communities. The gap between policy and practice was wide. The 1986 policy, introduced under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, sought to address these shortcomings. It placed special emphasis on removing disparities and equalising educational opportunity for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalised groups. It promoted a child-centred approach to primary education. It launched Operation Blackboard, a programme designed to improve the basic infrastructure of primary schools across the country. It also expanded the Open University system and called for the creation of rural universities inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy. The Programme of Action in 1992, which came under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, refined the 1986 policy and laid out detailed plans for its implementation. But even with these refinements, the core challenges remained largely unaddressed. The three-language formula continued to provoke resistance in the south. The six percent spending target remained out of reach. And the gap between children who had access to quality education and those who did not continued to widen.

#### 5. WHAT NEP 2020 BRINGS THAT IS NEW:

The National Education Policy 2020 builds on this history but also introduces significant changes. The most visible change is in the school structure. The old 10+2 system—ten years of schooling followed by two years of higher secondary—has been replaced by a 5+3+3+4 system that aligns school stages with the developmental needs of children. The early years, from age's three to eight, now receive dedicated attention through a foundational stage that includes preschool education. Higher education has also seen major changes. The policy introduces multiple entry and exit options, allowing students to leave with a certificate after one year, a diploma after two years, or a degree after completing the full programme. Credits earned can be stored in an Academic Bank of Credit and transferred between institutions. These changes are designed to make higher education more flexible and to accommodate students who may need to pause their studies for work or family reasons. Assessment is another area where the policy takes a different direction. Earlier policies had focused on examinations as a way to certify achievement. The 2020 policy shifts towards what it calls formative assessment—ongoing evaluation that helps students learn rather than simply ranking them at the end of the year. It proposes a new body called PARAKH to set standards for assessment across the country. Perhaps most significantly, the policy calls for moving towards instruction in the mother tongue or regional language until at least Class 5, and preferably until Class 8. This is a departure from the earlier emphasis on English-medium education, especially in the private sector.

## 6. THE OLD PROBLEMS THAT REFUSE TO GO AWAY:

For all its new ideas, NEP 2020 carries forward several problems that have haunted Indian education for decades. The Language Question-The three-language formula appears once again in NEP 2020, and once again it has provoked resistance. The formula suggests that students should learn three languages, with at least two being Indian languages. But the actual implementation has always been complicated. In Tamil Nadu, where opposition to Hindi is deeply rooted in the state's political history, the government has refused to implement the formula. The state teaches only Tamil and English and has consistently argued that the central government has no right to dictate language policy in the states. This is not a new conflict. The anti-Hindi protests of 1965 in Tamil Nadu were among the most intense in the state's history, and the issue has flared up repeatedly since then. NEP 2020's reaffirmation of the three-language formula has reignited these old tensions. The debate is not really about language alone—it is about the balance of power between the centre and the states, about cultural identity, and about who gets to decide what Indian children learn.

The Funding Gap- The 1968 policy called for spending six percent of GDP on education. The 1986 policy made the same call. NEP 2020 repeats it, stating that "the Centre and the States will work together to increase the public investment in the Education sector to reach 6% of GDP at the earliest." But as of 2020, total public spending on education was only about 4.43 percent of GDP. The central government's share was barely one percent. This gap between aspiration and reality is not an accident. Education is on the concurrent list, meaning both the centre and the states have responsibility for it. But the states, which bear most of the cost of education, often lack the financial resources to meet these targets. The centre's promise to work together with the states is vague, and the policy offers no concrete plan for mobilising the additional resources that would be needed.

The Federal Balancing Act-Related to both language and funding is the broader question of federalism. In a country as diverse as India, education policy inevitably involves delicate negotiations between the centre and the states. The 1968 policy spoke of assisting the states. The 1986 policy spoke of partnership. The 2020 policy, critics argue, speaks more in the language of direction than consultation. When the 2020 policy was approved, it did not go through Parliament. It was approved by the union cabinet alone. This has led some observers to question whether the policy truly represents the kind of national consensus that earlier policies sought to build. The resistance from Tamil Nadu, the concerns about Hindi imposition, and the questions about funding all point to a deeper tension: can a single national policy genuinely serve the needs of a country as diverse as India, or is some degree of regional flexibility not just desirable but essential?

## 7. WHAT THE PAST TELLS US ABOUT THE FUTURE:

The history of Indian education policy teaches us several things. First, vision alone is not enough. The 1968 and 1986 policies had noble goals, but implementation was always the weak point. The gap between what a policy promises and what it actually delivers is often wide. Second, certain questions keep returning. The language question is one. The question of financing is another. The question of how to balance quality with access is a third. NEP 2020 may be a new policy, but it is also the latest chapter in a conversation that has been going on for more than seventy years. Third, context matters. The India of 2020 is very different from the India of 1968 or

1986. The economy is larger, the middle class is bigger, and technology offers tools that earlier policymakers could not have imagined. At the same time, inequality is deeper, and the demands on the education system are more complex. NEP 2020 reflects this changed context in many ways—its emphasis on flexibility, its interest in technology, its attention to the demands of a global economy all speak to the world India finds itself in today. Yet the persistence of old problems suggests that even the best-designed policy cannot simply wish away structural constraints. Without adequate funding, without genuine consultation with states, and without resolving the language question in a way that respects India's diversity, even the most ambitious policy will struggle to achieve its goals.

## 8. CONCLUSION:

The National Education Policy 2020 is a significant document. It offers a new vision for Indian education, with fresh ideas about school structure, higher education flexibility, and assessment. It reflects the aspirations of a country that sees itself as a rising power and wants an education system that matches its ambitions. But it is also a document that cannot escape its own history. The questions it seeks to answer—about language, about funding, about the balance between centre and states—are questions that have been asked before. The answers NEP 2020 offers are not always new, and the solutions it proposes are not always convincing. The three-language formula still provokes resistance. The six percent spending target still seems distant. The relationship between the centre and the states remains unresolved. Understanding this history does not mean dismissing NEP 2020. It means recognising that education reform in India is always a work in progress. Each policy builds on what came before, carries forward some of the old tensions, and introduces new possibilities. The real test of NEP 2020 will not be in the vision it articulates but in the implementation it achieves. And that implementation, as the past repeatedly shows, is where the hardest work lies.

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