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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY (NEP) 2020 IN MAHARASHTRA: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theoretical and practical dimensions of implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in the state of Maharashtra, one of the first Indian states to attempt full-scale rollout across school and higher education. Using a qualitative, literature-based approach, the paper analyses how Maharashtra's diverse socio-economic landscape, urban-rural divide, and existing institutional structures interact with NEP 2020's core reforms, including the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, multidisciplinary higher education, and multilingual instruction. The paper identifies opportunities such as improved access, flexible learning pathways, and vocational integration, alongside challenges including teacher preparedness, infrastructural gaps, and administrative coordination. The paper concludes that Maharashtra's experience offers a valuable model, and a cautionary lesson, for other Indian states attempting similar reforms.

KEYWORDS: Keywords not detected.

National Education Policy 2020, Maharashtra, School Education, Higher Education, Educational Reform, Multidisciplinary Learning, Indian Education System

INTRODUCTION

Education policy in India has always carried the weight of nation-building. Since the Kothari Commission of 1966, successive policies have tried to balance equity, quality, and access across a country as vast and varied as India. The National Education Policy 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, represents the most ambitious rewrite of this vision in over three decades, replacing the 1986 policy. It proposes sweeping changes such as a new 5+3+3+4 school structure, early childhood care integration, flexible entry and exit options in higher education, and a strong push toward multidisciplinary and vocational learning.

Maharashtra occupies a special place in this story. As one of India's most industrially advanced and educationally diverse states, it announced its intention to become the first state to fully implement NEP 2020 across schools and universities. This decision makes Maharashtra a natural site for theoretical inquiry, since the state combines globally connected urban centres such as Mumbai and Pune with vast rural and semi-rural districts in Vidarbha and Marathwada, where resource constraints are far more acute. Studying Maharashtra, therefore, is not simply a regional case study but a lens through which the broader tensions of NEP 2020 implementation across India can be understood.

This paper builds a theoretical framework around three interlinked ideas: policy transition, structural readiness, and equity of access. It argues that the success of NEP 2020 in Maharashtra depends less on the policy's stated goals and more on how well existing institutions can absorb the pace and scale of change being asked of them.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Policy Implementation as a Layered Process

Education policy implementation is rarely a single event; it unfolds in layers, from national vision to state adaptation, and finally to classroom-level practice. NEP 2020 in Maharashtra can be understood through this layered lens, where each level introduces its own opportunities and frictions. At the national layer, the policy sets broad goals such as universal foundational literacy and a Gross Enrolment Ratio of fifty percent in higher education by 2035. At the state layer, Maharashtra must translate these goals into curriculum frameworks, teacher training modules, and institutional restructuring, often through bodies such as the State Council of Educational Research and Training. At the classroom layer, teachers and students experience the policy as changed textbooks, new assessment patterns, and unfamiliar pedagogical demands. When these three layers move at different speeds, gaps emerge, and it is precisely these gaps that this paper treats as the central object of theoretical concern.

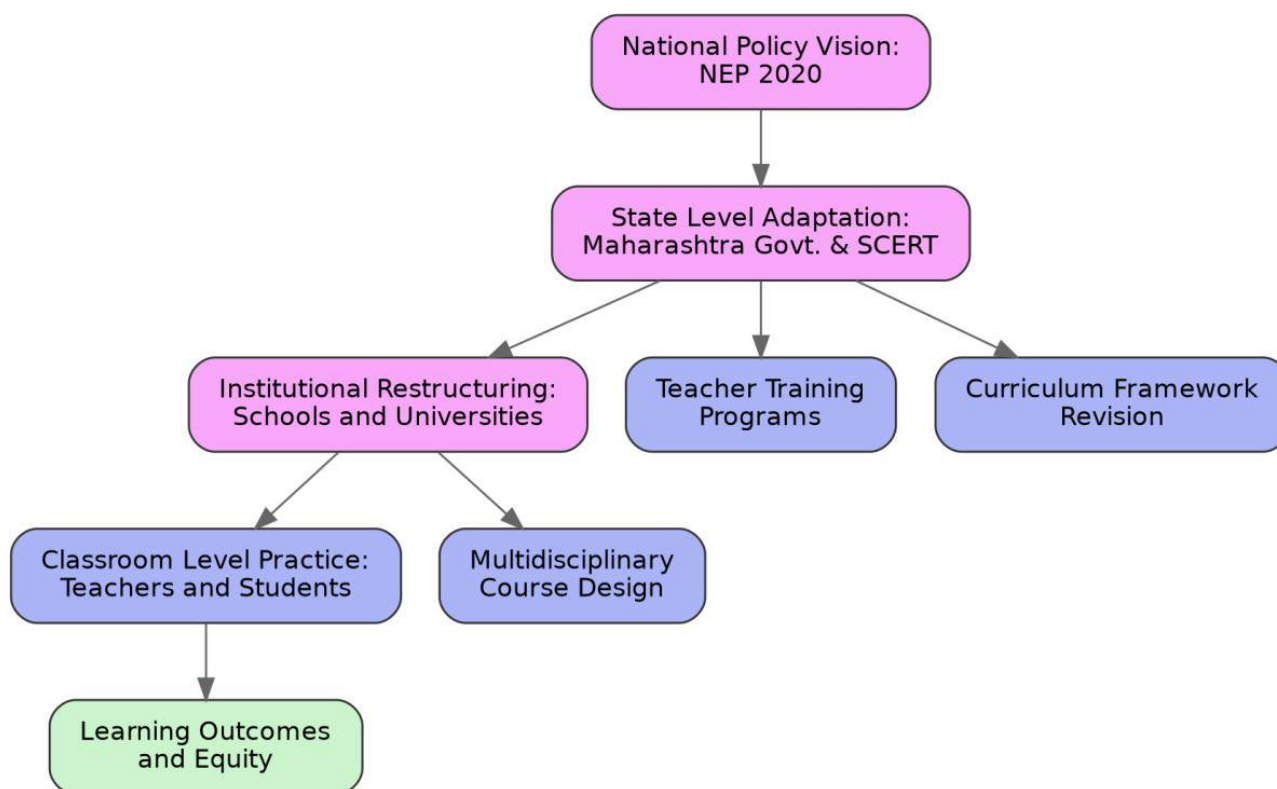


Figure 1: Layered implementation process of NEP 2020 in Maharashtra

Opportunities in School Education

The 5+3+3+4 structure introduced by NEP 2020 replaces the older 10+2 system with stages that more closely match a child's cognitive development, beginning with a foundational stage covering ages three to eight. For Maharashtra, this creates a genuine opportunity to formally integrate Anganwadi centres, which already exist in large numbers across the state, into the formal schooling pipeline. This integration could improve early literacy and numeracy

outcomes, especially in rural districts where pre-primary education has historically been informal or absent. The policy's emphasis on mother tongue or regional language instruction until at least grade five also aligns naturally with Maharashtra's strong existing base of Marathi-medium schools, offering a smoother transition than in states with more fragmented linguistic landscapes. Additionally, the push toward vocational exposure from grade six onward opens a path for Maharashtra's well-established industrial and agricultural sectors to partner with schools, giving students early exposure to practical skills alongside academic learning.

Challenges in School Education

Despite these opportunities, the theoretical promise of early integration runs into practical difficulty. Anganwadi workers, who are expected to deliver foundational learning under the new structure, often lack formal pedagogical training, and bridging this gap requires sustained investment that many local bodies struggle to provide. The rural-urban divide within Maharashtra itself becomes a serious constraint here, since districts like Mumbai and Pune have access to teacher training infrastructure and digital resources that districts like Gadchiroli or Nandurbar simply do not have in comparable measure. There is also a coordination challenge between multiple departments, including the Department of School Education, the Department of Women and Child Development, and local municipal bodies, each of which historically operated with limited overlap. Without stronger administrative convergence, the theoretical benefits of the new structure risk remaining confined to well-resourced urban schools.

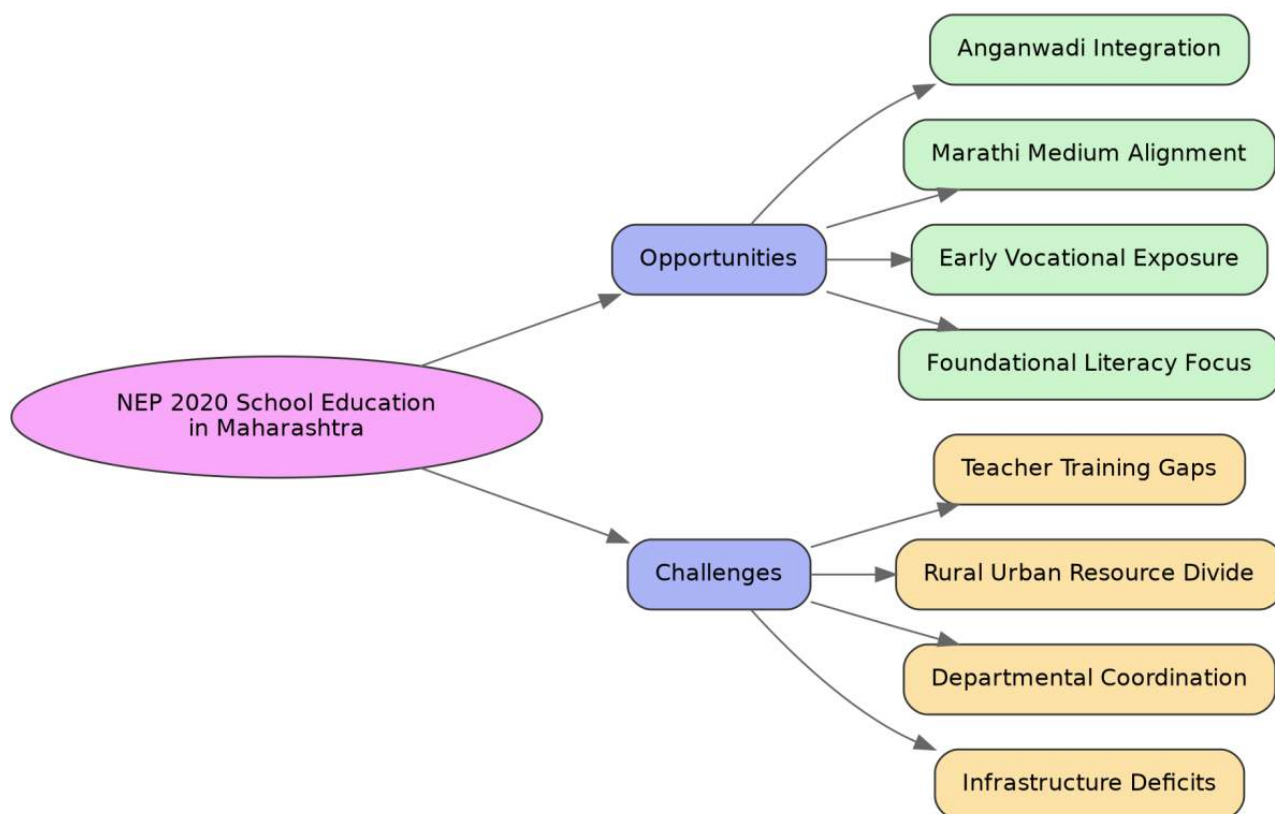


Figure 2: Opportunities and challenges in Maharashtra's school education under NEP 2020

Opportunities in Higher Education

At the higher education level, NEP 2020 proposes multidisciplinary institutions, flexible undergraduate degrees with multiple entry and exit points, and the creation of an Academic Bank of Credits. Maharashtra's higher education landscape, anchored by universities such as

Savitribai Phule Pune University and the University of Mumbai, is well positioned to pilot these reforms given its long history of autonomous colleges and diverse academic offerings. The four-year undergraduate programme, for instance, allows students to exit with a certificate, diploma, or degree depending on the number of years completed, which theoretically reduces the social and economic cost of dropping out, a concern that is particularly relevant for first-generation learners in Maharashtra's semi-urban colleges. The state's steering committee, formed specifically to guide NEP implementation, also signals a degree of institutional seriousness that could translate theoretical intent into workable structures faster than in states without such dedicated bodies.

Challenges in Higher Education

However, the shift toward multidisciplinary learning demands a complete overhaul of how colleges are staffed, timetabled, and assessed, and many autonomous colleges have expressed concern that the new oversight mechanisms, such as the State School Standards Authority and revised accreditation frameworks, feel administratively heavy rather than enabling. Smaller colleges, particularly those affiliated with less-resourced universities in Marathwada and Vidarbha, face genuine difficulty in offering the range of elective subjects that multidisciplinary education requires, since this depends on faculty availability across departments that may not exist on a single campus. There is also the deeper theoretical tension between the policy's aspiration for flexibility and the practical reality of India's exam-oriented culture, where students, parents, and even institutions remain more comfortable with fixed, linear degree pathways. Bridging this cultural expectation with the policy's structural flexibility will likely take longer than the administrative timeline suggests.

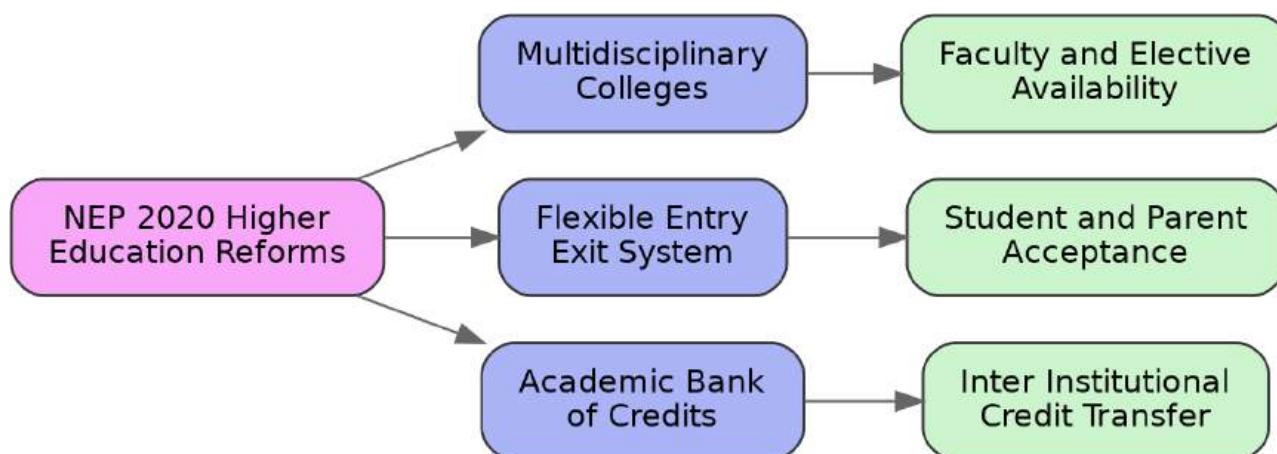


Figure 3: Structural reforms and associated constraints in Maharashtra's higher education under NEP 2020

Implications for Equity and Regional Balance

A recurring theoretical concern across both school and higher education is that reforms designed at a systemic level often produce uneven outcomes when layered onto a state as internally diverse as Maharashtra. The risk is not that NEP 2020 lacks vision, but that its benefits may accrue disproportionately to institutions and regions that already had stronger foundations before the policy was introduced. This has implications beyond education itself,

since unequal implementation could widen existing gaps in employability and social mobility between Maharashtra's urban and rural populations. A theoretically sound implementation strategy, therefore, needs to treat equity not as an afterthought but as a design principle guiding how resources, training, and monitoring are distributed across the state.

CONCLUSION

Maharashtra's attempt to fully implement NEP 2020 offers a rich case for understanding how ambitious national policy meets the realities of a diverse and unevenly developed state. The paper has argued that opportunities in early childhood integration, language alignment, vocational exposure, and flexible higher education pathways are real and meaningful, but they remain contingent on addressing structural challenges around teacher training, administrative coordination, and regional resource disparity. Future research should focus on empirical tracking of implementation outcomes across Maharashtra's districts, particularly comparing urban and rural learning outcomes over the next five years, to test whether the theoretical promise of NEP 2020 translates into equitable practice on the ground.

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