



Inclusive Education and National Education Policy 2020: A Review

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Abstract

The **National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)**, which was approved by the Union Cabinet of India on 29 July 2020, outlines the vision of India's new education system.^[1] The new policy replaces the previous National Policy on Education, 1986. The policy is a comprehensive framework for elementary education to higher education as well as vocational training in both rural and urban India. The policy aims to transform India's education system by 2040.

Shortly after the release of the policy, the government clarified that no one will be forced to study any particular language and that the medium of instruction will not be shifted from English to any regional language. The language policy in NEP is a broad *guideline* and *advisory* in nature; and it is up to the states, institutions, and schools to decide on the implementation. Education in India is a Concurrent List subject.

Key words : Gender equality, inclusive education, NEP and India

Introduction:

India has witnessed visible improvement in education especially with regard to education infrastructure and student's enrolment in the recent years. In particular, the Right to Education Act 2009 has successfully managed to increase enrolment in the upper primary level (Class 6-8). Nationally, between 2009– 2016 the number of students in the upper primary level increased by 19.4 percent. Implementation of schemes of sanitation and safety has also helped sustain this enrolment in the

country. The Census 2011 recorded literacy of women at 65.5%, for Muslims it had risen to 68.5 per cent and for Schedule Caste communities it had climbed to around 66 percent. Despite significant improvements in many crucial areas, Indian education systems continue to grapple with challenges of inequity and exclusion. Access to quality school education is still a dream for most rural population and the vulnerable and marginalized groups. This is even more acute in the higher education sector.

The National Educational Policy (NEP), 2020 attempts to address the growing inequality and inequity plaguing country's education system today. Among others, the NEP 2020 recognizes high dropout rates among socio-economic strata and vulnerable minorities. More importantly, there is recognition of barriers that lead to inefficient resource allocations such as small school campuses and causes for lesser participation of the girl child in rural areas. It also recognizes the unmet educational needs of children living in geographically difficult regions. The analysis piece takes a quick tour of key recommendations on inclusive education and records some of the key challenges that the NEP has to take head on.

Highlights of NEP2020

- New Policy aims for universalization of education from pre-school to secondary level with 100 % Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in school education by 2030.
- NEP 2020 will bring 2 cr. out of school children back into the mainstream through the open schooling system.
- The current 10+2 system to be replaced by a new 5+3+3+4 curricular structure corresponding to ages 3-8, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-18 years respectively.
- This will bring the hitherto uncovered age group of 3-6 years under the school curriculum, which has been recognized globally as the crucial stage for the development of mental faculties of a child.
- The new system will have 12 years of schooling with three years of Anganwadi/ pre-schooling.
- Emphasis on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, no rigid separation between academic streams, extracurricular, vocational streams in schools; Vocational Education to start from Class 6 with Internships
- Teaching up to at least Grade 5 to be in mother tongue/ regional language. No language will be imposed on any student.
- Assessment reforms with 360-degree Holistic Progress Card, tracking Student Progress for achieving Learning Outcomes
- A new and comprehensive National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, NCFTE 2021, will be formulated by the NCTE in consultation with NCERT.
- By 2030, the minimum degree qualification for teaching will be a 4-year integrated B.Ed. degree.
- Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education to be raised to 50 % by 2035; 3.5 crore seats to be added in higher education.

- The policy envisages broad-based, multi-disciplinary, holistic Under Graduate Program with flexible curricula, creative combinations of subjects, integration of vocational education and multiple entries and exit points with appropriate certification.
- Academic Bank of Credits to be established to facilitate Transfer of Credits
- Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), at par with IITs, IIMs, to be set up as models of best multidisciplinary education of global standards in the country.
- The National Research Foundation will be created as an apex body for fostering a strong research culture and building research capacity across higher education.
- Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) will be set up as a single overarching umbrella body for entire higher education, excluding medical and legal education. HECI to have four independent verticals – National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) for regulation, General Education Council (GEC) for standard-setting, Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) for funding, and National Accreditation Council (NAC) for accreditation.
- Public and private higher education institutions will be governed by the same set of norms for regulation, accreditation and academic standards.
- Affiliation of colleges is to be phased out in 15 years and a stage-wise mechanism is to be established for granting graded autonomy to colleges.
- Over a period of time, it is envisaged that every college would develop into either an Autonomous degree-granting College or a constituent college of a university.

Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

The NEP 2020 recognises that certain groups are grossly underrepresented in the existing educational systems. To specially address their educational needs, the NEP has clubbed gender identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities, and socio-economic conditions to create a new social group called SEDGs. The policy bases most of its objectives on creating inclusivity around these groups. As mentioned earlier, these groups have higher dropout rates due to a plethora of reasons, ranging from lack of accessibility for tribal communities (geographic) to historical exclusion of communities from systems of education for the socio-cultural identities categorization.

Recognising their special needs, the NEP 2020 recommends a series of policies and schemes such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers to incentivize parents to send their children to school, providing bicycles for transport that have worked in the past to increase enrolment, to create more representation.

There are numerous challenges to this broad categorization, though. It is problematic as the policy does not recognize caste as a historical inhibitor and does not prescribe the need for reservations. Similarly, there is no acknowledgment of the multiple structural inhibitors that plague these communities from succeeding in educational institutions because of the constant discrimination that they face from multiple sources. Importantly, the policy does not acknowledge the need for affirmative action that is recognized as the bare minimum to give equal representation. There is no recognition of caste inclusion and affirmative action for teacher appointments either.

Recognition of gendered identities:

The NEP 2020 recognises that female and transgender individuals across all the groups and socio-economic categories are the worst affected people. There are plans to implement schemes of giving out bicycles to form cycling groups and creating walking groups to schools to include community participation and make safety nets for these vulnerable students. Further, recognizing critical needs of education of the girl child, the new policy proposes the creation of a 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' to create better educational spaces for women and transgender individuals.

The fund will be accessible to states to create systems that will help the inclusion of these students. The fund will initiate provisions of sanitation, conditional cash transfers, bicycle distribution schemes, etc. Additionally, funds will also enable states to support and scale up effective community-based interventions that address local context-specific barriers to female and transgender children's access to and participation in education. In this regard, the policy recommends establishment of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas to provide better boarding facilities for students to tackle geographical barriers to education.

Despite these innovative ideas and proposals, the NEP is far from addressing core issues of inclusivity and conversations that are missing in the existing schooling systems. Historically, school curriculums have remained silent on discrimination based on sexual identification and orientation of individuals and specific discrimination that transgender individuals face in workspaces. These individuals are not accorded the basic respect that citizens deserve, and even though there has been a judicial abolishment of Article 377, conversations around identity are still considered a taboo and have led to multiple cases of discrimination in the past against these individuals.

To illustrate, as per the recent CBSE press release, there were 1,889,878 candidates in class 10 and 1,206,893 candidates in class 12. Among the students who registered for class 10 exam, 7,88,195 were girls, 11,01,664 were boys, only 19 were transgender persons. For class 12, as many as 5,22,819 were girls, 6,84,068 were boys, and six were transgender persons. Thus the transgender individual is also the worst represented minority in our schooling systems.

The numerical disparity is a large enough indicator to show that barriers faced by transgender individuals are disproportionately high. The new policy does not outline how it plans to increase enrollment for these students, nor does it convey ways to solve discrimination that these individuals face once inside educational institutions that lead to disproportionately exacerbated dropout rates.

Recognition of individuals with special needs

The policy recognizes children with special needs and believes in incorporating them into the mainstream education systems. It broadly aligns with the objectives of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016.

The policy also aims to recruit special educators in all school complexes to make sure that teaching is more inclusive and cognizant of the needs of children. Children with benchmark disabilities will be allowed to opt for home schooling and would be provided with skilled home schooling educators so that they can still learn and acquire the best educational facilities. Further, teachers will be trained to identify learning disabilities in children early on and to help children with learning disabilities succeed in education and take care of their mental health. National Assessment Centre, PARAKH will be formulated to create equitable systems of assessment for children with learning disabilities. Alternate models for schooling are proposed to advance this objective.

However, the NEP appears to be over ambitious and utopian on this front. It fails to recognize the fact that not only most teachers are poorly trained for such special assignments, it also misses to take into account how most of India's schools are grossly understaffed. The policy also doesn't clarify or elucidate how it plans to create alternative home schooling mechanisms that are accessible to individuals. For instance, in a recent evaluation undertaken by Delhi Child Rights Commission, as much as 60% of schools reported zero students with disabilities, and another 28 percent reported less than 1 percent. It highlights that people with disabilities are set to experience adverse socio-economic outcomes than persons without disabilities.

The new policy fails to specify a roadmap of how it will make sure that education is made accessible to these individuals. It also doesn't specify what the change in the curriculum would be to make sure that children with learning disabilities don't feel excluded in the extremely competitive environments that Indian schools operate in today.

Creation of Special Educational Zones

One of the standout recommendations of the NEP is the proposal to set up Special Educational Zones (SEZs) in regions with significant population belonging to Socio Economically Disadvantaged Groups and in those aspirational districts. The key purpose is to spread education in the remotest and farthest places in India. This will be done by pumping extra resources and aligning multiple schemes and programmes of Centre and states to transform these backward regions.

While this idea is novel and holds promise to transform educational access in inaccessible areas of the country (such as urban ghettos with substantial minority population), the policy hasn't specified what the criterion for these zones would be and how will they be distinguished in urban and rural landscapes. The policy has no clear indicator of what would be the determining factors.

Conclusion and Outcomes of NEP 2020:

According to the national education policy 2020, Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities at par with the IITs and IIMs will be set up in the country. These are scheduled to be set up for introducing multidisciplinary academic. The same list of accreditation and regulation rules will be used for guiding both the public and private academic bodies. Phased out college affiliation and autonomy will be granted to colleges. By the year 2030, it will be mandatory to have at least a four year B. Ed degree for joining the occupation of teaching. For making the students prepared for future pandemic situations, online academic will be promoted on a larger scale. The outcomes of new education policy are as follows.

- Universalization from ECCE to Secondary Education by 2030, aligning with SDG 4
- Attaining Foundational Learning & Numeracy Skills through National Mission by 2025
- 100% GER in Pre-School to Secondary Level by 2030
- Bring Back 2 Cr Out of School Children
- Teachers to be prepared for assessment reforms by 2023
- Inclusive & Equitable Education System by 2030
- Board Exams to test core concepts and application of knowledge
- Every Child will come out of School adept in at least one Skill
- Common Standards of Learning in Public & Private Schools

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