

# Reform and Reality: NEP 2020 vs. NPE 1986 in the Context of Indian Education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the trajectory of educational reforms in India, comparing the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. While NPE 1986 focused on access, vocationalization, and reducing disparities, it largely maintained a rigid, exam-centric system that stifled creativity and critical thinking. NEP 2020 marks a paradigm shift toward a holistic, student-centric, and skill-based approach aimed at equipping learners for the 21st-century knowledge economy. Through a comparative analysis of the two policies, this paper examines their objectives, curricular frameworks, assessment philosophies, and inclusivity strategies, while also reflecting on implementation challenges. The study provides insights into how past lessons can guide the effective execution of NEP 2020's ambitious reforms.

**Keywords:** NEP 2020, NPE 1986, Educational Reform, Curriculum Development, Assessment Reform, Inclusivity in Education.

## INTRODUCTION:

Education in India has long been seen as a vehicle for socioeconomic transformation. Over the decades, national education policies have reflected the country's evolving priorities. The National Policy on Education (1986) was a landmark document aimed at universalizing elementary education, bridging gender and caste disparities, and introducing vocational education. However, its effectiveness was hindered by a rote-based system and implementation gaps. In contrast, the National Education Policy (2020) was developed to respond to contemporary challenges such as globalization, technological disruption, and the changing needs of learners. It envisions a flexible, learner-centric, and equity-driven system that promotes creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. This paper examines the two policies comparatively, highlighting their conceptual underpinnings and practical implications.

### Objectives of the Study

- Highlight the key features of NPE 1986 and NEP 2020.
- Compare their approaches toward curriculum, assessment, and inclusion.
- Analyze the revolutionary shift introduced by NEP 2020.
- Examine both advantages and limitations of NEP 2020.
- Provide insights into effective policy implementation strategies.

## 3. Research Methodology

This qualitative study is based on secondary data drawn from academic journals, policy documents, government reports, and credible online sources. A comparative and conceptual analysis framework is used to assess both policies in relation to their objectives, execution strategies, and potential for transformation.

### The Salient Features of NPE 1986

NPE 1986, introduced under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, aimed to democratize education and align it with the country's developmental needs. Key provisions included:

- Universal access and retention of children up to age 14.
  - Emphasis on vocational and technical education for employability.
  - Establishment of Navodaya Vidyalayas to nurture rural talent.
  - Focus on teacher training and institutional development, including DIETs and SCERTs.
  - Promotion of regional languages and the use of the mother tongue in early education.
  - Adult and non-formal education as a tool for lifelong learning.
  - Attention to equity, with strategies for gender equality and support for marginalized communities.
- Despite its forward-looking vision, the policy largely retained an exam-oriented, memory-based system, with limited reforms in pedagogical methodology.

### NEP 2020: A Paradigm Shift

NEP 2020 breaks from traditional paradigms,

introducing a comprehensive and flexible approach:

- Replacement of the 10+2 structure with a 5+3+3+4 model, aligned with cognitive development stages.
- Emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).
- Promotion of multilingualism, with instruction in the mother tongue till Grade 5 or 8.
- Integration of vocational education and coding from Grade 6.
- Introduction of competency-based assessments and reduction in curriculum load.
- Focus on teacher professional development, including a new curriculum for teacher education.
- Creation of institutions like PARAKH (assessment), HECI (regulation), and NETF (technology).
- Provision for multiple entry-exit options in higher education and the Academic Bank of Credit.
- Introduction of Special Education Zones and a Gender Inclusion Fund.

### Revolutionary Vision of NEP 2020

NEP 2020 proposes a future-ready educational framework:

- Personalized learning through competency-based approaches.
- Shift from rote learning to experiential and analytical skills.
- Vocational and entrepreneurial exposure early in the curriculum.
- A push for globalization of education with top international institutions allowed to set up campuses in India.
- Enhanced focus on research and innovation, with the creation of the National Research Foundation (NRF).
- Adoption of technology-driven models, including virtual labs and online resources.

This vision aims to position India as a knowledge hub while preserving its cultural heritage.

### 8. Advantages and Disadvantages of NEP 2020

- Promotes flexibility and interdisciplinarity in learning.
- Reduces exam stress through continuous evaluation.
- Focus on skill development and employability.
- Facilitates early technological literacy and coding.
- Strong emphasis on inclusivity and gender equity.
- Advocates for increased education funding (6% of GDP).

Disadvantages

- Mother tongue instruction may challenge mobile families (e.g., military personnel).

- Delayed English exposure could hinder global communication skills.
- Infrastructural gaps (e.g., lack of electricity or internet) make coding and digital tools inaccessible in many rural areas.
- Implementation complexity across states with different capacities.

### 9. Challenges in Implementation

Despite its visionary outlook, NEP 2020 faces significant hurdles:

- State-level autonomy in education may lead to inconsistent implementation.
- Financial constraints and delayed allocation of promised 6% GDP may limit reach.
- Teacher training gaps could undermine quality reforms.
- Technological infrastructure deficiencies, especially in rural schools, remain a key barrier.
- Resistance to change from traditional stakeholders could slow the pace of reforms.

### Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents a bold departure from earlier policies like NPE 1986, introducing a dynamic, learner-centric, and globally aligned educational system. While NPE 1986 laid the groundwork for inclusion and vocationalization, its structural rigidity limited systemic transformation. NEP 2020, by contrast, is future-oriented and integrates pedagogy, technology, and flexibility to foster critical thinking and innovation. However, the successful realization of its goals depends on robust execution, collaborative federalism, and sustained investment in capacity building. Only with coordinated action across governments, institutions, and communities can India transform its educational aspirations into reality.

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