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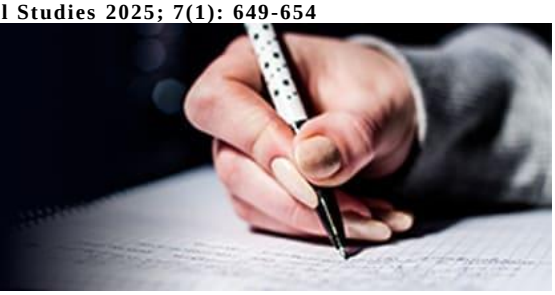

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Implications of national education policy in contemporary India

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Abstract
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, a transformative policy shift in India's education system, aligns with the country's aspirations of transitioning into a knowledge economy, promoting creativity, critical thinking, and skill development. Shaped by the historical limitations, and dynamic socio-economic landscapes the policy aims to provide increased access to education for a self-reliant India. Amidst a political commitment to nation-building, the policy underscores the importance of multidisciplinary education and the incorporation of Indian culture in the curriculum. NEP 2020 breaks away from the traditional rote learning methodology, promoting instead a more holistic and integrative learning approach, thereby better preparing students for demands of the 21st century. The policy also acknowledges the significance of early childhood education, lifelong learning, and the extensive use of technology in education. Intersecting socio-economic-political-educational goals are embodied in the policy's focus on multilingualism, promoting national unity while equipping students with globally valuable skills. NEP 2020 faces numerous challenges, but in responding comprehensively to the current multifaceted landscape of India, possesses the potential to inaugurate a new epoch in the country's education system.

Keywords: NEP, multidisciplinary education, implementation challenges, resource allocation

Introduction
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [1], unveiled by the Government of India, marks an important step in the field of education, setting out a comprehensive framework to guide the development and management of education in India [2-4]. Introduced after a gap of 34 years, the NEP 2020 replaces the previous National Policy on Education, formulated in 1986, and updated in 1992 [5,6].

Aiming at a complete overhaul of the existing education system, the policy outlines transformative changes, ranging from the restructuring of school education (from a 10+2 system to a 5+3+3+4 system) to increased focus on vocational studies and a multilingual approach [4, 7]. It also addresses critical aspects like teacher training, curriculum development, and assessment methods, with a notable emphasis on digital education and innovative pedagogy [4, 8].

Furthermore, the policy extends to higher education, proposing a flexible and multidisciplinary approach, aiming to significantly increase the enrolment ratios [4, 6]. In all, the National Education Policy 2020 reflects a deep recognition of the evolving dynamics of the global knowledge landscape, aiming to transform the education system of India into a vibrant knowledge hub [1, 6].

Historical Perspective
The changing demands and needs of the educational landscape in India has led to the formulation of various policies that define its rich and extensive history in reforming education. The groundwork for a public education system in India was laid by the establishment of the Indian Education Commission in 1882, also referred to as the Hunter Commission [9]. This marked the inception of education policies in India.

Post-Independence, India saw its first comprehensive education policy with the University Education Commission, 1948-1949, under Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan [10].

This was followed by the Secondary Education Commission, 1952-1953, which focused on the reorganisation and improvement of secondary education [11].

The first National Policy on Education came into being in 1968, under the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi [12]. It was primarily influenced by the Kothari Commission's (1964-1966) report [13]. A significant shift from 'British-patterned education' to adopting a more 'Indian ethos of education' marked the policy, with recommendations like the adoption of a 10+2 pattern of education as well as the three-language formula [12].

The second National Policy on Education was adopted in 1986, and later updated in 1992 [5]. This policy emphasised 'Education for All', the Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs), and introduced schemes like Operation Blackboard [14]. It also focused on the vocationalization of secondary education, adult education, and education of socially disadvantaged groups [5].

Despite these policies, the Indian education system faced numerous challenges over the years, including lack of access and gaps in quality, need for curriculum reform, high dropout rates, and a vast disparity in educational access and achievement among different socio-economic groups. These realities underscored the need for a more comprehensive, inclusive, and futuristic policy, leading to the formulation of the National Education Policy, 2020 [1 pp. 7, 10-12].

Motivation for a new policy

The education sector in India has witnessed significant shifts and changes over the past few decades. With globalisation, the advent of digital technologies, and changing economic scenarios, the demands on India's educational landscape have been evolving and increasing rapidly. These developments called for a forward-looking and comprehensive policy like NEP 2020.

There were numerous issues with the education quality in the existing system, such as students graduating from schools while lacking literacy and without basic numeracy skills [15], and very few Indian universities making the cut amongst the global rankings of higher education institutions [16].

The previous policy lacked emphasis on skills like critical thinking, creativity, scientific temper, communication, digital literacy, and life skills. This brought up the question of the curriculum's relevance in the fast-evolving society and economy. The growing disconnect between learning and required skills in the real world necessitated a policy that would shape the education to be more holistic, flexible and relevant [5, 17].

Inclusivity and equal opportunity were also needed in education to support the marginalised and remote communities. There was a need for bridging the disparities in access and achievement across different socio-economic groups that could not be fixed with other initiatives [18].

Advancements in technology, especially digitalisation, meant that the previous policy was inadequate to cover the role of technology in transforming the economy, healthcare, industry and different aspects of life. Hence the policy should address the education needed to realise the potential and tackle the challenges of digital technology [19].

Globalisation also necessitates the requirements for an education that would generate a globally competitive workforce, with the students acquiring broader skill sets, completing higher levels of education, and being more flexible. The education system would therefore need to realign with the demands of globalisation [20].

Another important factor was the demographic change, where the Indian population would have an average age of 29 in 2020s, providing a unique opportunity for socio-economic development of India, which could only be realised with a high quality, equitable and robust education system [21].

Aligning the education system of India to the requirements of the 21st century, providing quality education to the young population, and overcoming the limitations of the previous policy were therefore some of the motivations for the NEP 2020.

Political Background

NEP 2020 should also be analysed with its contemporary political context, since the policy reflects the central government's vision of addressing the long-standing challenges in India's educational landscape and leveraging education as a tool for India's socio-economic transformation.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which came to power in 2014, started the process of formulating a new education policy as a part of their manifesto commitment. The government aimed to revamp India's education system such that it met the demands of positioning India in a modern globalised world and aligned with their overarching vision of an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' or a self-reliant India [22].

The drafting process started with the appointment of a committee led by TSR Subramanian in 2015. While the committee submitted its report in 2016 [23], its recommendations were not accepted by the government in full and instead constituted a new committee in 2017 under the chairmanship of eminent scientist Dr. K. Kasturirangan [24, 25]. The new Kasturirangan Committee submitted the Draft National Education Policy in 2019 [26].

There were extensive consultations at multiple levels, including with the states, education being a concurrent subject in India under the Constitution [27]. In July 2020, while the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges in teaching and methods of digital learning, the Union Cabinet approved the National Education Policy 2020, making it the third education policy in an independent India [2].

Politically, NEP 2020 can be seen as the government's attempt to respond to the changing global educational trends and national aspirations. [28, 29] It also aligns with their broader development agenda, like the Digital India initiative, Skill India mission, and emphasis on multilingualism and cultural preservation, which is apparent in the emphasis on mother-tongue based instruction in the formative early years [1 pp. 13-14]. The policy however has been criticised by some for promoting centralization, undermining the role played by the states, and not adequately addressing the issue of resource allocation for education [30].

The approval of National Education Policy 2020 by the Union Cabinet marked the culmination of a comprehensive and participatory policy formulation process. This policy would shape the education landscape of a future India through its reformative features.

Key Points and Important Features

The salient features of the new policy (NEP 2020) affect India's higher education system not only to make it more

internationalised, but also increase the gross enrolment. It aims to provide more regulation, provide professional education as part of higher education and prevent commercialisation of India's education system [1 pp. 30-33].

An aim of the policy is to increase the gross enrolment ratio to 50% through the use of open learning platforms with the options of distance learning. It also plans to establish an Academic Bank of Credit, where students would be able to store their earned credits, and are rewarded degrees which are based on the credits from recognized higher education institutions [1 pp 35, 37].

The assessments carried out by MHRD have found that inclusion of arts and humanities in STEM fields leads to positive learning outcomes with increased creativity and innovation. Hence, regarding research institutions in India, the new policy has a strong focus on holistic and multidisciplinary education, as well as setting up of multidisciplinary educational and research universities [1 pp. 36-37].

The focus on increasing the education levels of India's youth is also laid out in the policy, as it "aims to achieve 100% youth and adult literacy" [31]. The higher education institutes would make lifelong learning possible [1 pp. 35, 51-52], and provide new and diverse education degree programmes, with multiple entry and exit options [1 pp. 35-37]. The setting up of the National Research Foundation would be done following the policy's guidelines to help the various research institutions become centres of innovation, function as incubation centres and strengthen the industry-academic linkages [1 pp. 45-46].

The policy also focuses greatly on the improvement of education and preparation of teachers who would then contribute to the improvement of the country's education. This includes pedagogical training for stage specific professional training, career mapping and mentoring mechanisms. Various facilities for the acquisition of necessary skills for the teachers at all the levels of school and university would be established. National mission for Mentoring would take the help of retired and senior professors/teachers to provide mentorship to the new members of academia. And at an institute level, the affiliating university and government would help in mentoring the colleges for their development [1 pp. 23, 42-43].

While also increasing the investment in India's education sector, the policy also recommends the principle of 'light but tight' regulation. This may be achieved by holding all educational institutions to similar standards of audit, strengthening of advisory boards to ensure the focus on quality of education in the institutions. Various bodies shall hold responsibility for promotion of higher education, which would also facilitate free flow of ideas to enrich the system and its administration through the inclusion of technology [1 pp. 47-49, 61-62].

Implications

The changes to India's educational landscape would impact students, teachers and other professionals involved in education, both in short term and long term.

With the shift towards a more holistic, flexible, and student-centric approach, it is expected that students would find learning more engaging and less stressful. The policy's emphasis on experiential learning and critical thinking [1 pp. 5, 12] will encourage students to explore, inquire, and understand concepts, rather than rote learning. In the long term, by providing an adequate literacy, strong foundational numeracy base, emphasising vocational education, and developing a robust assessment system, NEP 2020 aims to prime the students for the challenges of the future [1 p. 5]. Students would be better equipped with the 21st-century skills essential in a global, increasingly digital world, such as critical thinking, creativity, information technology literacy, and adaptability [17].

The shift towards more professional and well-structured teacher training will improve the teaching and learning quality in the classroom. The focus on 'continuous professional development (CPD)' [1 p. 22] will keep teachers updated with the latest pedagogical strategies and content knowledge. Over time, these changes are expected to enhance the professional status and job satisfaction of teachers. The policy's provision for career growth based on merit and performance might attract more talented individuals to the profession of imparting education, leading to an improved education quality [1 pp. 22, 40-41].

The proposed multidisciplinary approach will encourage institutions to broaden their curricula and offer more diverse courses. Increased autonomy may lead to more innovation and responsiveness to local needs. In the long run, higher education institutions might become powerhouses of innovation, and among world leaders in research output. The integration of technology in teaching, tutoring, and learning, as well as in the administration would potentially enhance the reach and efficiency of these institutions [1 pp. 34-37, 49].

This new policy would have far reaching impact on the socio-economic scale too, as the emphasis on inclusiveness and equity might result in increased enrolment from marginalised groups and improved gender balance in schools and colleges. Over time, NEP 2020 can lead to a more educated and skilled population, ready to become contributors to the nation's development. This can result in increased productivity, reduced poverty, and enhanced socio-economic mobility, which would be ideal for realising a Self-reliant India [1 pp. 24-27, 45-46].

These changes in the education system for the students in their manner of receiving education, changes in pedagogical strategies and teaching practices for the teachers, and restructuring of academic offerings, and regulatory frameworks - while promising and ambitious, would require careful implementation to ensure that the intended benefits reach all stakeholders. Translation of NEP 2020 into practice would dictate its efficacy and actual impact at all educational levels [1 pp. 61-62].

Significant shifts have been suggested by NEP 2020 for the Indian education system, which require careful execution to redevelop the curriculum, train the teachers, and reorganise the school infrastructures. Regulations would require not only legislation, but also systemic follow-through and cultural changes [1 pp. 60-61].

Cooperation of the stakeholders, and collective commitment would play a paramount role in the successful effectuation of the policy. From central and state governments, to institutions of education and teachers, concerted efforts would be required for beneficial and efficacious realisation of the policy to enact proposed changes [1 pp. 60-61].

To ensure smooth operations and intended outcomes, continuous monitoring and regular evaluations would be required to mitigate varying challenges and unforeseen circumstances. These evaluations could inform of any deviations of policy's real world impacts from the original

intentions, to allow making of any necessary adjustments [1 pp. 60, 62].

Therefore, the successful implementation and execution of the transformative and forward-thinking changes brought by NEP 2020 relies on careful and effective implementation strategies, collective participation from all involved parties, and continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms. This would ensure intended benefits of the policy are fully actualized and broadly distributed throughout the educational landscape of India.

Challenges

Implementation of NEP 2020 is not without significant challenges, primarily in terms of the existing infrastructure deficit and other systemic constraints. The shift to a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, the introduction of multiple entry and exit points in higher education, the integration of vocational education from class 6 onwards, and other such progressive measures necessitate substantial upgrades to the physical and digital infrastructure [1 pp. 9-10, 59]. However, many schools and educational institutions, especially in rural and remote areas, lack basic facilities such as functioning classrooms, libraries, laboratories, sanitation facilities, and digital learning resources [32].

Pedagogical challenges in terms of training of teachers and increasing assessment capacity to implement the new approaches proposed by the NEP are also significant. A shortage of qualified teachers already affects the current education system [1 p. 20], which may worsen in rural and remote areas as the system is made more digital; areas where introducing technology has shown limited benefits due to lack of necessary infrastructure, student skills and teaching capabilities [33, 34]. The shift to an experiential and application based learning would therefore necessitate comprehensive retraining of existing teachers and changes to the education of teachers [1 pp. 22-23, 57-58].

Budgetary challenges arise from the proposal to increase the public spending on education from current 4.6% to 6% of the GDP. This would necessitate substantial financial commitment from both the state as well as central governments. Even with sufficient funding, the weaknesses in governance and pedagogy can hinder the translation of educational spending into the improvement of learning outcomes [35].

Low instructional time due to administrative work, teacher absenteeism [36] and lack of recognition and sanctions for contributions and non-performance respectively are also pedagogical challenges to better student learning [37].

Crisis in the Indian education system can also be attributed to the flawed prioritisation of the “sorting and selection” of the talented students for higher education rather than on “human development” to ensure all students achieve learning outcomes. This is exacerbated by the fast-paced curriculums, disregarding the learning level differences in students in the same grades, and evaluation methods which do not emphasise the effectiveness of learning strategies [38]. Therefore, without addressing implementation gaps and inadequate evaluation, the NEP 2020's potential to reform the education system will be constrained [39].

Another issue with the implementation of the NEP 2020 lies in the language policy. Instruction in the mother tongue could be a challenging task owing to the linguistic diversity of India, and the practical difficulties of development of high quality materials for teaching and learning in all languages. These and other challenges arising from political, social and economic contexts in India need to be tackled to achieve the aspirations of NEP 2020.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 comes at a time when India is aspiring to transform itself into a knowledge economy. The emphasis placed by the policy on creativity and critical thinking, and skills training is in line with the socio-economic goal of achieving a workforce that can drive innovation and economic growth. Further, the policy's focus on equitable and inclusive education is crucial for addressing socio-economic disparities and for empowering marginalised communities.

The policy's focus on education in the languages spoken in India and the integration of Indian culture in the curriculum may be seen as an effort to foster an appreciation of national identity. Simultaneously, the emphasis on constitutional values in education echoes the democratic ideals of equality, liberty, justice, and fraternity.

It also marks a decisive break from the colonial legacy of imperial-style education in India. Moving away from rote memorization towards holistic and integrated learning, the policy reimagines education to better suit the requirements of the 21st century. It acknowledges the importance of education in the formative early childhood years, lifelong learning, and the integration of modern technology in the classroom - reflecting trends in global education discourse.

For instance, the strategic aim of fostering national identity is aligned with the goal of a global workforce establishment in the policy's focus on multilingualism. Multilingualism has educational benefits, promotes national unity, and equips students with skills valuable in the job market worldwide.

NEP 2020, therefore, stands at the intersection of socio-economic-political-educational spheres, where it provides a comprehensive response to the dynamic demands and opportunities of these different but co-dependent landscapes [40]. Meeting the demands of a rapidly growing, youth workforce heavy national economy, and at the same time mitigating the shortcomings of the previous education policies to provide equitable access to marginalised communities, and the provisions for significantly improving the enrolment ratios and teaching quality at all educational levels, the new policy has the potential to usher in a new era of educational reforms in India. However, infrastructure and pedagogical challenges would require detailed planning, appropriate allocation of resources and a phased approach to implement the ambitious NEP 2020.

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