



EDUCATIONAL RENAISSANCE IN INDIA: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL STUDY OF POST- INDEPENDENCE PROGRESS

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Abstract

India's education system has undergone significant transformations since 1947, aiming to build a more inclusive, equitable, and high-quality system. Policy reforms have been implemented to address challenges of access, quality, equity, and relevance. This study is an attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Indian education system since independence. By integrating theoretical frameworks, historical contexts, and empirical data, the study offers a multidimensional perspective on the progress and challenges in Indian education. Theoretical perspectives such as Human Capital Theory, Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Critical Pedagogy are employed to understand the goals and functions of education. Historical analysis traces the impact of colonial legacies, national development goals, and global influences on educational policies and practices. Empirical insights are drawn from data on access, quality, gender parity, and inclusivity in education. The study highlights significant achievements, persistent disparities, and the need for continuous reform to build an inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education system in India.

Keywords: *Indian Education, Educational Transformation, Theoretical Perspectives, Historical Analysis, Empirical Insight, Quality, Gender Parity, Inclusivity, Educational Reform.*

INTRODUCTION

The British arrived in India for commercial purposes, but their educational strategy aimed at cultural invasion and political conquest (Rahman et al., 2018). Before introducing Western education through English and providing governmental support for educational advancements in India (Guha, 1997), the British East India Company had a policy of apathy toward education until 1812. The transformation of the Indian education system post-independence was a monumental task that aimed indigenize the educational framework inherited from the British colonial rule (McEldowney, 1980). The need for restructuring Indian education after independence was driven by decolonization, economic development, social equity, and national integration (Lin & Martin, 2005). The colonial education system was designed to serve the British Empire's interests, promoting Western values and marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems. Post-independence, India needed a skilled workforce to drive industrialization, modernization, and economic growth. The focus was on developing scientific and technological capabilities to achieve self-reliance and compete globally.

The colonial education system in India underwent significant transformation through policy reforms, curriculum changes, infrastructure development, and initiatives promoting inclusivity and equity. Key commissions like the University Education Commission and Kothari Commission emphasized equity, access, quality improvement, vocational education, and technology integration. The National Education Policy (NEP) of 1986 and 2020 aimed to increase access, promote inclusivity, and promote national integration. The NEP 2020 is a landmark moment in Indian education, aiming to overhaul the existing system by addressing access, quality, equity, and relevance. The policy focuses on holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible education to prepare students for the 21st century demands. However, challenges such as limited financial and human resources, resistance to change, quality vs. quantity, and persistent inequalities continue to shape educational development. The journey of educational transformation in India is ongoing, requiring continuous reform and innovation to build an education system that empowers all individuals and contributes to national development.

METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF STUDY

The study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of educational reforms in India since independence, focusing on theoretical, historical, and empirical dimensions. It also seeks to evaluate the relevance of the NEP 2020 within this context. The research design adopts a compound methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative



research methods to ensure a holistic understanding of educational reforms in India. Historical context examination of historical documents, policy papers, and scholarly articles to trace the evolution of the Indian education system from the British period to the modern day. Recent policies analysis of the NEP and other appropriate policy files to understand the recent reforms and their objectives.

Empirical data collection includes statistical data from government reports, educational surveys, and international databases such as the Annual Status of Education Report, District Information System for Education, National Sample Survey, and other empirical documents. Historical context examines the impact of the colonial education system on post-independence educational policies and practices.

The analysis is grounded in Human Capital Theory, Functionalist and Conflict Theories, and Critical Pedagogy to explore the role of education in economic development, social hierarchies, and power structures within education systems. A qualitative historical method is employed to trace the trajectory of education policy from colonial legacies to the current National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The quantitative dimension relies on secondary datasets from reputable sources, such as UDISE+, NSSO, ASER, and NCERT Surveys and Learning Achievement Studies. Data is analysed to identify trends and disparities across gender, caste, region, and socio-economic background.

Qualitative supplements include structured interviews with educators, administrators, and policy experts, as well as a broad review of academic literature and evaluation reports. The multidimensional analytical approach integrates macro-level policy analysis, micro-level outcomes, and cross-sectional comparisons, addressing both educational progress and persistent challenges holistically. This robust methodological structure strengthens the reliability and validity of the study's findings and conclusions, addressing both educational progress and persistent challenges in a holistic manner.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN INDIA

Since it offers a clear and fundamental understanding of how people learn, the ideals underlying education, and a framework for creating effective interventions, a strong psychological, philosophical, and theoretical foundation is crucial for national transformations in education (Cebrian & Junyent, 2015). This foundation aids in setting national educational goals, directing the development of national curricula, meeting social requirements, fostering coherence and consistency, assessing efficacy, and comprehending the nature and purpose of learning as a process. With an emphasis on individual growth, civic involvement, critical thinking, and workforce readiness, educational psychology and philosophy offer a concentrated understanding of how students learn, grow, and are impacted by their surroundings (Cao et al., 2023). If they provide a solid basis, they guarantee targeted and intentional formulation, seamless execution, and equitable assessment of changes across educational levels and regions, resulting in the nation's progressive educational development. To comprehend and assess the current suggestions included in NEP 2020, it is essential to analyse the theoretical, philosophical, and psychological underpinnings of all the educational reforms that were attempted following independence.

The psychological foundations of educational reforms in India since independence are deeply rooted in key theories and principles. Behaviourism, the classical educational theory, particularly the work of B.F. Skinner, has influenced educational practices by emphasizing reinforcement and punishment in shaping behaviour (Resnick, 2017). This is evident in the focus on rote learning and standardized testing in early educational reforms. This theory played a significant role in shaping Indian educational policies and reforms. From the National Policy on Education 1968 to the NEP 2020, these theories have influenced various aspects of educational practices, including classroom management, teaching methods, student assessment, and inclusive education (Srivastava, 2021). The NPE 1968 emphasized the importance of teacher training and modern teaching methods, leading to the launch of the National Council of Educational Research and Training. The NPE 1986 introduced a child-centered approach, recognizing individual differences and learning styles, leading to the implementation of the National Open School and the District Primary Education Programme. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) - 2001 aimed to universalize elementary education and ensure access, retention, and quality in elementary education. Using behavioural techniques such as rewards and incentives, the program led to significant improvements in enrolment rates and a reduction in dropout rates, particularly among girls and marginalized communities. The RTE (Right to Education Act) 2009 made the right to education for children aged 6 to 14 years a fundamental right, emphasizing positive reinforcement and behaviour modification techniques to create a conducive learning environment.

Constructivism, is another significant educational concept, based on Vygotsky's Social Constructivism and J Piaget's Cognitive Development theory, has influenced the shift towards collaborative and interactive learning environments. It underscores the active role of students in constructing their personal knowledge and understanding through experiences, social interactions, and reflection. Indian educational policies and reforms have incorporated constructivist principles into their curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment, inclusive education, and teacher training (Biswas, 2018). The NPE 1986 introduced a child-centered approach, emphasizing experiential learning and active student participation. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 1988 and 2005

embraced constructivist principles, promoting inquiry-based learning and practical experiences in the curriculum. The NEP 2020 emphasizes experiential learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving, reflecting constructivist principles (Majumdar, 2022). Humanistic psychology, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Approach, has influenced educational practices by promoting student-centered learning. The NEP 2020 reflects constructivist principles by advocating for a multidisciplinary approach, experiential learning, and the integration of vocational education.

Constructivism theories have significantly influenced educational practices, including curriculum redesign, teaching methods, assessment, inclusive education, and teacher training. These changes have made learning more relevant and engaging, promoting deeper understanding and retention of concepts. Assessment practices have shifted from rote memorization to evaluating learners' capability to think critically, apply knowledge and solve problems. Inclusive education practices have led to inclusive classrooms, and teacher training programs have incorporated constructivist principles. The focus on intrinsic motivation and student autonomy is evident in the NEP 2020. Cognitive development has been emphasized through Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development, which leads to age-appropriate curriculum design and teaching methods (Priyamvada, 2018). Metacognition, such as self-regulation and self-assessment, promotes lifelong learning and adaptability to new challenges. Social and emotional development has been recognized, with reforms focusing on the development of social and emotional skills. Positive psychology aims to create a positive school climate that fosters resilience, optimism, and a growth mindset among students. Therefore, it is obvious that all of India's major educational changes have strong psychological underpinnings.

Educational reforms and policies in India have also been inspired by many philosophical frameworks, such as Gandhian humanism, Nehruvian socialism, and Tagorean liberalism (Patel, 2019). Gandhian philosophy emphasized the holistic development of individuals, integrating moral, physical, and intellectual growth. The NPE 1968 and 1986 reflected Gandhian principles by promoting vocational education and the integration of work and education (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). Socialism, rooted in Nehru's vision, aimed to create a national system of education that provided equal opportunities for all, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. The NPE 1968 aimed to create a common school system and universalization of elementary education (Misra, 2015). The NEP 2020 reflects liberal principles by promoting a multidisciplinary approach, allowing students to choose subjects of their interest and fostering a well-rounded development.

The NEP 2020 focuses on equity and social justice, aiming to provide equal opportunities for all, particularly marginalized groups. It emphasizes holistic development, recognizing the importance of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The curriculum incorporates Indian culture and values, emphasizing multilingualism and integrating national identity and cultural heritage. The NEP 2020 continues to prioritize these philosophies, ensuring no child is left behind. Overall, the psychological and philosophical roots of educational changes and policies in India are firmly ingrained in essential ideas and ideologies that reflect the country's different needs and ambitions. As India evolves, it is critical to build on these theoretical foundations, ensuring that every child has access to a quality education and the opportunity to prosper in the twenty-first century.

Although the theoretical underpinnings offer crucial insights into the psychological and philosophical drivers of educational changes, it is just as crucial to demonstrate the analytical capabilities of these frameworks in this research. The analytical emphasis of this multifaceted investigation is sharpened in the next section, which describes the explicit application of each chosen theoretical lens—Human Capital Theory, Conflict Theory, and Critical Pedagogy—in connection to certain educational innovations.

- **Enhanced Use of Theoretical Frameworks:** The study's theoretical frameworks, each of which is in line with a distinct aspect of educational change, are employed in an integrated yet focused manner to guarantee conceptual clarity and analytical coherence: The National Education Policies' emphasis on labour preparedness, skills training, and vocational education growth is interpreted using the human capital theory (NPE 1986, 2020). It presents education as a calculated investment in productivity and economic growth. This framework is used to evaluate policies that support technical and higher education, such as the National Skill Development Mission and the employability focus of NEP 2020, in order to show how the Indian government aims to match education with market demands.

- **Conflict Theory:** Conflict Theory is employed to analyse structural inequalities and the privatization trends in the Indian education system. It critically examines how educational access and quality remain stratified by caste, class, and region despite formal policy commitments to equity. The study applies this lens particularly to post-liberalization policies and the proliferation of private schooling, arguing that these reforms, while expanding options, often exacerbate social hierarchies rather than dismantle them.

- **Critical Pedagogy:** Drawing from Paulo Freire and contemporary decolonial education scholars, Critical Pedagogy is used to interrogate curriculum inclusivity, language policies, and pedagogical approaches. It informs the analysis of efforts such as mother-tongue instruction, multidisciplinary education, and the inclusion of marginalized perspectives in curricula. NEP 2020's emphasis on local culture, ethics, and critical thinking is



interpreted through this lens to assess its potential in democratizing knowledge production and classroom power dynamics.

By deploying these frameworks in a complementary manner—each tailored to a specific axis of reform—the study avoids overlap and enhances analytical depth. This approach not only strengthens interpretive clarity but also illuminates the interconnections between economic, political, and pedagogical transformations in post-independence Indian education.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The British colonial education system in India was marked by elitism and fragmentation, prioritizing anglicized Indians over indigenous knowledge systems. This led to a cultural and intellectual divide, with a focus on English language, literature, and western education (Portia, 2015). The East India Company and British government attempted to provide modern education, starting with the Charter Act of 1813 (Pratheesh, 2025). This led to the establishment of schools and colleges imparting Western education. Lord Macaulay's Minute on Education in 1835 emphasized the teaching of English language and literature, leading to the establishment of English-medium schools and colleges. The Wood's Dispatch Act was a key move which recommended the establishment of a network of schools and colleges, a graded system of education, and the promotion of vernacular languages alongside English (Mayhew, 1928). The Act aided India's modern education movement and pushed private educational institutions and promote girls' education. The establishment of universities and schools, such as the University of Madras, University of Calcutta and the University of Bombay marked the beginning of higher education in India (Suyadi et al., 2020). The curriculum focused on English literature, history, mathematics, and science, with traditional western teaching methods. Despite all of its critiques and drawbacks, this western education system played a key part in India's social and intellectual development, leading to the rise of a modern, educated elite and, eventually, the national awakening that led to independence.

The move from colonial to native education was critical for independent India. Independent India required an education system that was comprehensive, equal, and in line with the socioeconomic and cultural goals of a newly independent nation (Sherman, 2018). The construction of a native education system in India was motivated by a variety of factors, including mental decolonization, cultural hegemony, psychological impact, economic development, social equality, inclusion, national integration, and civic duty. India's educational reforms sought to universalize education, indigenize the curriculum, emphasize vocational and technical education, and improve socioeconomic fairness. Policy improvements, such as the 1968 National Policy on Education (NPE), curricular reforms, infrastructural development, and inclusivity and equity measures, were carried out.

The Indian Parliament and first Central Education Minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, established various education commissions to recommend reforms for a more inclusive, equitable, and relevant education system. The Indian Constitution which was enforced in 1950, provides a comprehensive framework for education and research, ensuring equitable and inclusive education for all citizens (Juneau & Juneau, 2011). It mandates for children aged 6-14 free and compulsory education (Article 45), forbids discernment based on race, religion, caste, gender, or place of birth (Article 15), and grants minorities the right to establish and manage educational establishments of their choice (Article 30). Also, the Article 46 indorses the economic and educational interests of weaker sections including the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and defends them from social injustice. Article 350A provides facilities for mother-tongue instruction for linguistic minority children. The 42nd Amendment of the constitution in 1976, moved education from the State List to the Concurrent List, offering uniformity, equal resource distribution, and central oversight.

The Parliament ensured significant budgetary allocations for education, with the Kothari Commission, Secondary Education Commission, and the University Education Commission, reviewing higher education, secondary education, and recommending a comprehensive national education system. The University Education Commission (1948-49) recommended the establishment of more universities, improved teacher training programs, and curriculum reforms that aligned with national goals and values. The commission's recommendations led to the establishment of several new universities, enhancing access to higher education. The Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) recommended a diversified curriculum, a common school system, improved teacher training, and standardized teaching methods. The Kothari Commission (191964-66) proposed a comprehensive national system of education, including a common school system, universalization of elementary education, and integration of vocational and technical education. The commission's recommendations laid the foundation for a more inclusive and relevant education system, influencing the formulation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1968.

India has had several National Education Policies (NEPs) since its independence, each reflecting the socio-economic and political context of its time. The major policies include the NEP 1968, NEP 1986 (modified in 1992), and the latest NEP 2020. The NEP 1968 aimed to provide free and compulsory education up to 14, promote national integration, and emphasize vocational education for employment. It focused on rural, backward, and



tribal areas, especially the education of girls. The policy called for improved educational facilities, the Common School System, and expanded facilities for physically and mentally handicapped children. It also stressed the importance of talent identification, work-experience, and national service in education. It called for the establishment of agricultural universities, examination reforms, and extension of secondary education to previously denied areas.

The National Policy on Education of 1986 aimed to promote socialism, democracy, and secularism through education, fostering national self-reliance, and providing quality education to all students. It proposed a national system of education based on the 10+2+3 structure, focusing on early childhood care, lifelong education, and education for all, including girls, SCs, STs, and OBCs. The policy also emphasized vocational education, open university systems, adult and continuing education, and the establishment of Navodaya Vidyalayas. The revised Programme of Action aimed to ensure equal access to quality education for all students, regardless of caste, creed, location, or sex. A significant change of the 1986 policy was planned for 1992, with the goal of creating an educational system that was more responsive to India's shifting socioeconomic landscape. It stressed non-formal education, addressed the learning needs of various groups, and included provisions for underprivileged groups like as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Backward Classes. Scholarships, incentives, curriculum restructuring, and teacher training were implemented as part of the goal to make secondary education more relevant and instil principles of secularism and democracy.

The goal of the 1993 Yash Pal Committee report (Learning without Burden) was to lessen student burden while improving the quality of education. It suggested that instructors be involved in curriculum development, that teacher-student ratios be decreased, that textbook weight be decreased, that homework be avoided, that teacher training be improved, that education committees be established, that private school recognition standards be strengthened, and that technology be used more in the classroom. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 is another educational framework in India designed to modernize the education system, focusing on the concept 'learning without burden'. It provides a structure for teachers and schools to plan experiences for children and conceptualizes the curriculum as a means to articulate required experiences. The curriculum should connect knowledge to life outside the school, prioritizing inclusive education and flexible examinations.

A major legislation in India, the Right to Education Act guarantees the implementation of the ideal "free and compulsory education to all children aged 6 to 14 years" as a fundamental right, making it a justiciable one. It was enacted by the Indian Parliament on August 4, 2009, and came into effect on April 1, 2010. It places a strong emphasis on including students with disabilities and students from underprivileged groups, such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. To guarantee the quality of education, the act establishes minimal requirements for school facilities, instructor credentials, and student-teacher ratios. Additionally, the act encourages curriculum and pedagogy that are activity-based and child-centered. Increased enrolment, lower dropout rates, better infrastructure, and better teacher preparation and quality have all resulted from the RTE Act. Its successful implementation is nonetheless hampered by resource limitations and implementation gaps, especially in rural and isolated locations. It also has provisions for admitting out-of-school children to age-appropriate courses, prohibiting physical punishment, mental harassment, and discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, and other factors.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a comprehensive framework designed to transform India's education system to meet the needs of the 21st century. It addresses the demographic dividend, employment challenges, economic globalization, social equity and inclusion, technological advancements, and historical contexts (Wao & Wao, 2022). The policy focuses on skill development, vocational education, and higher education reforms to make the youth employable and competitive in the global market. In an increasingly globalized world, India needs to ensure its education system is aligned with global standards. NEP 2020 emphasizes the integration of vocational education, multidisciplinary approaches, and the use of technology to prepare students for the global workforce. The policy also promotes research, innovation, and higher education by establishing research institutions and fostering a culture of innovation.

While the historical overview emphasizes the paradigm change from colonial to indigenous frameworks, a closer look at important policy milestones demonstrates how various commissions and legislation affected India's changing educational agenda. The following section charts seven historic initiatives, each of which was a cornerstone in India's educational reform, to provide a systematic knowledge of how access, equity, quality, and inclusion evolved over time.

POLICY LANDMARKS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN EDUCATION: ANCHORING REFORMS THROUGH DECADES

Since its independence, India's educational trajectory has been defined by a number of significant policy frameworks and commission recommendations that established the structural, conceptual, and practical underpinnings for reform. These actions served as compass points, responding not just to sociopolitical imperatives of the moment, but also establishing long-lasting principles that continue to affect policy today.



- **University Education Commission (1948–49):** Dr. S. Radhakrishnan chaired the commission, which was India's first significant endeavour to rethink higher education. The Commission established the framework and philosophies for India's higher education after independence. It was a turning point in the growth of Indian academics because it moved the emphasis from colonial elitism to inclusive, value-based, and development-oriented education. It highlighted the importance of democratic citizenship, spiritual values, and the merging of research and education. It recommended:
 - Universities have autonomous status.
 - Liberal education based on Indian values.
 - The University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in 1956.
- **Secondary Education Commission (1952–53):** Also known as the Mudaliar Commission, it aimed to democratize secondary education and make it more responsive to the needs of both individuals and the nation.
 - It is recommended that the curriculum be diverse.
 - Advocated for vocational education streams.
 - Teacher training and standardized evaluation were heavily emphasized.
 - Advocated for guidance and counselling services in schools.
- **Kothari Commission (1964–1966):** This panel, widely regarded as the most comprehensive post-independence education evaluation, proposed a National System of Education. It offered the well-known 10+2+3 framework and identified three pillars: equality, quality, and quantity. The key recommendations were:
 - Common School System.
 - Education is free and obligatory for children up to the age of 14.
 - Integration of job experience and moral education.
 - Emphasized education as a powerful instrument for national integration, modernization, and economic development.
 - Recommended that 6% of GDP should be allocated to education.
- **The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968:** It was India's first formal education policy and created in response to the Kothari Commission's recommendations (1964–66). The strategy sought to alleviate inequalities and raise the standard of education nationwide, acknowledging that it is an essential tool for social integration and national development. It concentrated on:
 - Promoting national integration.
 - Equalizing educational possibilities, particularly for marginalized people.
 - Emphasizing the growth of Indian languages.
 - Proposed learning a regional language, Hindi, and English to promote national integration and multilingual competence.
- **NPE 1986 (modified in 1992):** This strategy was groundbreaking in terms of gender equity and rural schooling. Key Features:
 - Adult education, lifetime learning, and early childhood development.
 - Operation Blackboard for elementary school infrastructure.
 - Navodaya Vidyalayas are being established for talented children from rural areas.
 - Increased decentralization through District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs).
- **The Right to Education Act (2009):** The RTE Act made education a justiciable fundamental right for children aged 6–14 years. It mandated:
 - Compulsory admission and retention.
 - Prohibition of capitation fees and screening procedures.
 - Norms for infrastructure, teacher qualification, and student-teacher ratios.
- **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020:** A landmark reform aligning India's education with 21st-century needs. This policy:
 - Introduced a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure.
 - Emphasized holistic, multidisciplinary, and experiential learning.
 - Promoted foundational literacy, vocational education, and digital integration.
 - Focused on mother-tongue-based instruction, flexibility in subject choice, and liberal arts.
 - Advocated a National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) to catalyse innovation.

Shaping the Future, the Empirical Foundations

The educational reforms and the policies that follow Empirical insights from pertinent educational studies and research conducted both domestically and internationally have propelled India since its independence. Regular surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey (NSS) provide valuable data on literacy rates, enrolment levels, and educational attainment across different regions and demographic groups. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) reports provide insights into the learning levels of children in rural India, highlighting gaps in quality and access (Ramchand et al., 2024). Participation in global assessments such as the Trends in International



Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) provides benchmarks for comparing the performance of Indian students with their global counterparts (Daghigh & Rahim, 2020). From the global practices, learning from successful education systems in countries like Finland, Singapore, and South Korea has informed policy decisions and reforms in India.

Institutions like the Indian Institutes of Education (IIEs) and the NCERT conduct research on various aspects of education, providing empirical insights that inform policy decisions. The commission provided recommendations on various aspects of education, including higher education, vocational education, and the use of information technology. Justice Varma Commission (2012) focused on the issues of teacher education and the quality of teacher training programs. Also, research published in academic journals and books contributes to the body of knowledge on educational practices and reforms.

Census reports in India provide valuable data on demographic, social, and economic indicators, such as literacy rates, educational attainment, and school enrolment. These insights can inform the reframing of educational policies to address existing gaps and promote inclusive and equitable education. Key empirical insights from census reports include disparities in literacy rates across different states, regions, and demographic groups, such as the national literacy rate of 74.04%, which is higher in urban areas than rural areas. Policies should focus on reducing regional and gender disparities in literacy, particularly in states with lower literacy rates. Gender disparities are also highlighted, with male literacy rates at 82.14% compared to female literacy rates of 65.46%. Programs like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao can be expanded and strengthened to address this gap. School enrolment and dropout rates remain a concern, particularly at the secondary level. Policies should address root causes such as poverty, lack of access to quality education, and social barriers to improve retention. Urban-rural divides are also highlighted, with urban areas reporting higher literacy rates and better access to educational facilities compared to rural areas. Educational policies should aim to bridge these divides by investing in rural education infrastructure, teacher training, and quality educational resources. The diverse linguistic landscape of India presents challenges for educational policy, particularly in terms of medium of instruction and curriculum development. Policymakers should promote multilingualism by incorporating local languages into the curriculum and providing bilingual education where necessary.

AN OVERVIEW OF NEP 2020 FROM DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVES

NEP focuses on developing learners' respect for constitutional values including fundamental duties, tie with their national pride, and awareness of their part and accountability in a changing world. This policy proposes a new pedagogical and curricular restructuring of school system in to five + three + three + four pattern, covering ages three to eighteen including Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age of three. The ECCE comprised play-based, multi-faceted, activity-based, flexible, multi-level, and inquiry-based learning, focusing on cognitive progress, psycho-motor advance, emotional-social-ethical development, artistic/cultural development, communication and early language, literacy, and numeracy. The schooling system is shifting from regular, formative to summative assessment, competency-based approach that promotes learning and advance for learners. The progress card for school-based assessment will be redesigned by states/UTs, providing a holistic, 360-degree report that reflects each learner's progress in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. AI-based software will track students' growth and provide information on strengths, interests, and focus areas, helping them make optimal career choices.

The government of India decided to improve rural schools' service environment through NEP which aims to create a more inclusive, equitable, and effective education system by addressing the digital divide. It will provide local housing and allowances for teachers, halt excessive teacher transfers, strengthen Teacher Eligibility Tests, and encourage hiring local experts as master instructors. A technology-based comprehensive teacher-requirement planning forecasting exercise will be conducted by each state to assess teacher vacancies over the next two decades. Outstanding teachers will be incentivized through a merit-based structure of tenure, promotion, and salary. By 2030, teacher education will move into multidisciplinary colleges and universities, with a minimum degree qualification of a 4-year integrated B.Ed. degree. The policy also emphasizes the importance of interventions for minority communities and the digital divide.

Understanding the overall course of India's educational reforms in terms of institutional restructuring, pedagogical changes, and policy evolution is made easier by the parts that came before this one. The effectiveness of these changes must be assessed, meanwhile, in terms of who gains from them and how well they advance social justice. In order to provide light on the lived reality underlying policy ambitions, the following section explores the concrete methods used to incorporate excluded groups in the educational environment.

INCLUSIVITY AND EQUITY IN EDUCATIONAL REFORMS: REACHING THE MARGINS

Since gaining independence, India's educational policies have placed a greater emphasis on equality and inclusion, focusing on historically underrepresented groups to provide equitable access and opportunity. Articles 15, 30, and

46 of the constitution guarantee educational rights and safeguards for underprivileged groups. Subsequent governmental frameworks and initiatives have significantly intervened, building on these legislative protections.

- **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs):** To address historic disadvantages, policies like free uniforms, scholarships, hostels, and pre-matric stipends were introduced for SC and ST children. Programs such as Ashram schools, tribal language primers, and mid-day meals were implemented to boost retention and minimize dropout rates. Institutions like the UGC introduced fellowships such as the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship for SCs/STs and remedial coaching schemes to support access and success in higher education.

- **Religious Minorities:** For religious minorities, schemes like the Maulana Azad National Fellowship and Residential Coaching Academies aim to reduce educational backwardness. SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) has been extended to Madrasas, and minority-concentration districts have been prioritized for infrastructure and outreach programs.

- **Girls and Women:** The rapid expansion of female education has been a major achievement, though disparities persist. Programs such as the Indira Gandhi Postgraduate Scholarship for Single Girl Child and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya have specifically targeted female students. Recent NEP 2020 provisions reinforce the emphasis on eliminating gender stereotypes in curriculum and promoting girls' participation in technical and vocational fields.

- **Children with Special Needs:** Inclusive Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and its successor schemes ensure that children with physical and cognitive disabilities are integrated into regular schools wherever possible. These initiatives include infrastructure modifications, special educators, and financial support for transportation, readers, and equipment

Bridging Policy and Practice: Ground Realities of Educational Reform

Although India's educational programs, ranging from the Kothari Commission to the NEP 2020, represent ambitious goals, systemic, regional, and institutional constraints frequently lead to inconsistent results in practice. Despite their broad goals, policy frameworks encounter practical obstacles including inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic lethargy, and a dearth of localized planning mechanisms.

For example, UDISE+ data shows significant regional differences in digital infrastructure, access to libraries, restrooms, and student-teacher ratios, particularly in rural, tribal, and hill regions. Uniform policy application is further complicated by caste-based exclusion, linguistic variety, and unequal economic growth. Due to inadequate implementation methods, underfunded programs, and low awareness, many people continue to face exclusion despite affirmative action rules for SCs, STs, religious minorities, and children with disabilities. Furthermore, the effects of change are lessened by centralized policymaking, curriculum overload, teacher absenteeism, and undertrained staff. According to ASER data, even as enrolment increases, many government schools face challenges in sustaining learning outcomes. The gap between the private and public sectors is still growing, especially in cities where privatization has made it harder for the underprivileged to obtain high-quality education.

In order to close this gap, the study highlights the significance of:

- Locally based, decentralized planning.
- Mechanisms for community involvement and accountability.
- Enhancing administrators' and teachers' capacity.
- Mechanisms for tracking and evaluating learning outcomes that go beyond enrolment.
- Forms of collaborative governance that include the corporate sector, NGOs, and civil society in feedback loops and policy implementation.

The study is positioned to contribute not only to academic debate but also to policymaking and educational planning thanks to this praxis-oriented approach, which enhances the theoretical frameworks employed throughout the article.

CONCLUSION

India's post-independence educational journey has been marked by a commitment to inclusivity, equity, quality, and relevance. Key policy milestones, such as the University Education Commission (1948–49) and the National Education Policy (2020), have shown progress in democratizing education and addressing systemic disparities. The study uses theoretical frameworks like Human Capital Theory, Conflict Theory, and Critical Pedagogy to contextualize reforms in economic, political, and social dimensions. Empirical analysis using data from UDISE+, NSSO, ASER, and NCERT reveals significant progress in enrolment, literacy, and infrastructure, particularly for marginalized groups.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a significant step towards transforming the Indian education system, focusing on universal access, equity, quality, and relevance. It promotes a holistic and multidisciplinary approach, emphasizing early childhood care and education, multilingualism, inclusive education, teacher training, and



technology integration. However, challenges remain in bridging the digital divide, ensuring pedagogical innovation, and fostering contextualized curricula. As India moves forward, integrating technology, robust teacher training, continuous professional development, and policy coherence are essential. Public-private partnerships can offer valuable resources, scalability, and innovation if aligned with public goals of equity and inclusion. A future-ready education system must remain dynamic, responsive, and inclusive, grounded in local realities but informed by global standards.

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