A Comparative Study of India's National Policy on Education (1986) and National Education Policy (2020)

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Abstract

The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 and the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 are two significant blueprints for higher education, which portray the aspirations and realities of their period. The NPE 1986 stressed equality, access, and quality, especially for disadvantaged groups. More importantly, it established a foundational structure; its application was restrained by heavy content and an examination-centric approach that highlighted rote learning and could not address fundamental deficiencies in providing funds and infrastructure. The then classic education pattern of the 10+2+3 structure was established through Operation Blackboard, which focused on minimum facilities. The aim of NPE 1986 was to ensure equal educational opportunities, advocate for gender equality, and expand educational infrastructure. Similarly, the NEP 2020 seeks systematic transformation to meet the demands of the 21st century, emphasising flexibility, interdisciplinarity, technology, and global integration. The NEP 2020 is a radical change, with a focus on holistic and multidisciplinary learning, digitalisation, global competitiveness, and flexible student pathways. Its key principles contain equity, flexibility, and internationalisation, supported by technological interventions and integrated learning. The central argument is that while the vision of NEP 2020 is sound and uniquely tailored to modern demands, its successful realisation is contingent upon a new level of political will, stakeholder collaboration, and resource mobilisation to bridge the persistent gap between policy and practice.

Keywords: digitalisation, vocationalisation, infrastructure, mobilisation, predilection.

Introduction

Education serves as the foundation stone for national and social transformation. India's educational transformation is guided by two landmark policies – NPE 1986 and NEP 2020. NPE 1986 focused on addressing post-independence challenges of equity and quality, emphasising universal elementary education, adult literacy, and support for marginalised groups. Key initiatives included Operation Blackboard, district-level education centres, and vocational and teacher training. NEP 2020 marks a paradigm shift, introducing a flexible 5+3+3+4 structure replacing the traditional 10+2 system and integrating vocational skills and coding from middle school. It aims for a 100% gross enrollment ratio (GER) and envisions a holistic system from early childhood to higher education. Together, these policies reflect India's commitment to building an inclusive, empowered, and skilled society (Nayak, et. al 2024).

1. The Foundational Framework: The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986

In its respective period, the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 was a pivotal and comprehensive framework for the educational reforms. The policy consisted of 12 parts and 157 articles and was designed to address the educational needs of its time, particularly for human resource development for the 21st century (Ministry of Human Resources, 1986).

1.1. Core Principles and Objectives

At its core, the policy sought to establish a *National System of Education* based on a uniform 10+2+3 structure. This system was intended to guarantee that all students, regardless of their background, could have access to education of a *comparable quality*. This principle was a noble endeavour to face the uneven and contrasting nature of the education segment by creating a distinct national structure.

The policy's objectives also involved the universalisation of elementary education, the vocationalisation of education, and the promotion of adult education. It introduced several new institutions, such as the *Navodaya Vidyalayas*, designed as lead schools to provide quality education to able students from rural/backward areas, and the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), and launched to improve teacher education. This top-down, integrated approach was the policy's central characteristic (Ministry of Human Resources, 1986). Its primary objective was to regulate the educational experience and bring it into line with national integration goals, thereby building an organised system rather than fostering the single competencies of learners.

1.2. Provisions for Higher Education and Research

The NPE 1986 offered a series of progressive reforms rather than an essential renovation for higher education and research. The policy intended to augment opportunities and democratise higher education through the Open University system (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), founded in 1985, was recognised as a key institution to be supported to fulfil this objective. A principally forward-thinking facility for its time was the proposal to *de-link degrees from jobs* in areas where a university degree was not a requirement. This was intended to deliver *greater justice* to candidates who were otherwise qualified for a job but were unable to obtain it due to an unnecessary predilection for graduates. The policy specified that this delinking would not apply to occupation-specific fields like engineering, medicine, or law. A National Testing Service was also planned to organise voluntary tests to assess a candidate's aptness for a job.

On the research front, the policy proposed network arrangements between different institutions to pool resources and cooperate on projects of national importance. It also tasked the University Grants Commission (UGC) with setting up a mechanism to coordinate research in priority areas, particularly in science and technology. These provisions reveal a practical and reactive approach. They aimed to address existing problems in a piecemeal fashion rather than comprehensively restructuring the link between education, employment, and innovation. The focus was on fixing a few broken links within the existing system – such as the overemphasis on degrees for all jobs – rather than proactively re-engineering the total system for a future-oriented, innovation-driven economy.

1.3. Challenges and Limitations

In spite of its visionary goals, the implementation of NPE 1986 faced several significant challenges and limitations that finally weakened its full prospective. The policy largely maintained a *content-heavy, examination-centric approach* that often led to a system prioritising memorisation over critical thinking and creativity. This pedagogical failure meant that the education system produced a pool of human resources that could contribute to the value chain of development, but were not essentially invigorated with the critical and innovative skills vital for the present knowledge economy.

A chief recurrent challenge was financial planning. The policy faced restrictions due to a lack of clarity and inadequate financial resources for the improvement application. The long-standing recommendation to spend 6% of GDP on education, which was included in the 1986 policy, was never fully recognised. This funding gap continued and became a major barrier to accomplishing the policy's ambitious aims. Other challenges included the continued existence of inequalities in educational admittance, particularly for marginalised communities. The policy also did not explicitly emphasise continuous professional development for teachers, nor did it dictate cohesive practical training, which limited the ability of educators to adapt to new methodologies. These persistent challenges from the focus on rote learning to the unfulfilled funding promise are the very reasons for many of NEP 2020's most major reforms. The new policy is a straight reaction to the accepted limitations of its predecessor.

2. The Vision for a Knowledge Society: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

2.1. Guiding Principles and Structural Reform

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 is outlined as a *paradigm shift* in the Indian education system, intended to address the challenges and objectives of the 21st century. The policy moves away from the traditional 10+2+3 structure, which was the hallmark of the 1986 policy, and introduces a new 5+3+3+4 curricular and didactic outline for school education (Ministry of Education, 2020). The guiding principles

of NEP 2020 are a direct answer to the limitations of the previous system. The policy emphasises all-inclusive and multidisciplinary education, abstract understanding over rote learning, and the development of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Nayak, et.al 2024).

A central philosophical shift is the move from a focus on standardisation to one of customisation. Unlike the uniform *National System* of 1986, NEP 2020's new structure and flexible curriculum frameworks are intended to nurture the unique aptitudes of each student. By promoting a reduction of curriculum content to its *core essential* elements, the policy makes space for more universal, discussion-based, and systematic learning. This approach aims to provide a more well-versed and rewarding education that moves beyond a one-size-fits-all model. The policy is an effort to create a system that is resilient and adjustable to a rapidly changing world, obviously refuting the stiff, exam-centric nature of the old policy.

2.2. Opportunities and Innovations for Higher Education and Research

NEP 2020 offers unprecedented opportunities and innovations for college and research students, moving beyond the incremental reforms of the past. The policy provides a new level of flexibility for undergraduate students through the Multiple Entry and Exit (MEE) system. This provision allows students to exit a programme at different points and receive a corresponding certification: a certificate after one year, an undergraduate diploma after two years, a bachelor's degree after three years, and a bachelor's degree with honours or honours with research after four years. This system is a direct evolution of the limited "de-linking" concept from NPE 1986. It provides a comprehensive, structural mechanism for career mobility and lifelong learning, allowing students to return to their studies later due to unforeseen circumstances, thereby mitigating the impact of socio-economic constraints on their educational journey (Chauhan & Shivani, 2024).

To facilitate this flexibility, the policy proposes the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), which promotes interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary academic mobility and allows for the transfer of credits across higher education institutions. This is a fundamental change that empowers students to choose their own learning path. For research, NEP 2020 proposes the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) with a substantial initial capital of INR 20000 crores. The NRF's overarching goal is to catalyse quality academic research across all fields, providing a reliable, merit-based, and equitable funding base. This new funding architecture fundamentally changes the research landscape in India, as it moves towards an independent and comprehensive approach across disciplines, directly addressing the long-standing issue of low research output (Umachagi, 2022).
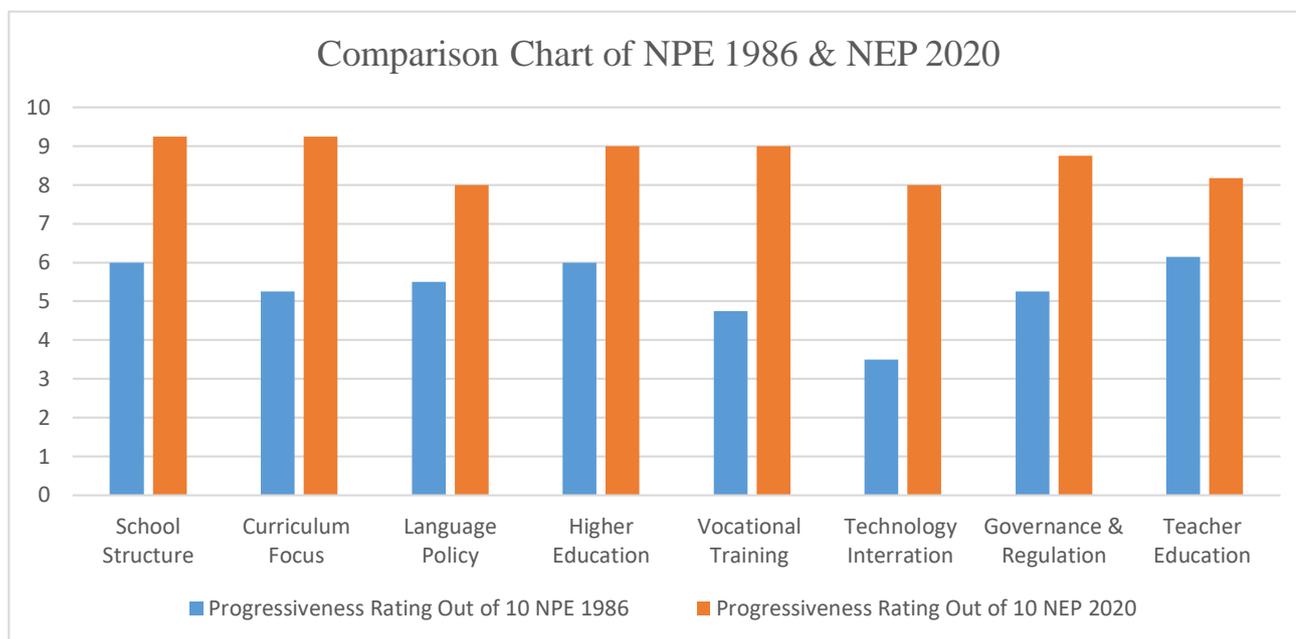
2.3. Integration of Technology and the Digital Age

A key feature of NEP 2020 is its explicit recognition of the "dramatic scientific and technological advances, such as the rise of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence." The policy views technology not just as a tool for modernisation but as a foundational element of the new education system and a catalyst for a changing global workforce. It argues that the rapid changes in the employment landscape require a shift from rote learning to a flexible, integrated, and multidisciplinary curriculum that enables students to *learn how to learn* (Dharbe, 2020).

To institutionalise this vision, the policy proposes the creation of the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) as an autonomous body. The NETF is designed to offer a platform for the free exchange of concepts on technology use in education and to offer independent, evidence-based guidance to governments and educational institutions. Its functions consist of building intellectual capacities, visualising planned thrust areas, and articulating new guidelines for research and innovation in educational technology. This planned and total approach stands in glaring contrast to the primary vision of technology in NPE 1986, which was chiefly about modernising classrooms. The new policy recognises technology's potential to do away with language barriers and increase access for students with disabilities. The explicit mention of AI and machine learning indicates that this is a policy written for the future of work, a concept that was largely missing from the 1986 document. The success of NEP 2020 is inseparable from its capability to influence technology to bridge educational gaps and foster a new outlook that prepares students for an AI-driven world (Amalan et. al, 2023).

| Comparative Analysis: NPE 1986 vs. NEP 2020		
Feature	National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986	National Education Policy (NEP) 2020
Policy Objective	Access, equity, quality, retention and removing disparities (e.g. adult literacy, women's empowerment	Access, equity, quality, affordability, accountability (5 Pillars). Transform India into a vibrant knowledge society aligned with SDG 4.
School Education Structure	10+2 system, fixed course duration, focus on deep discipline specialisation	Flexible 4-year multidisciplinary UG courses with multiple entry/exit options and credit transfer.
GER Target (Higher Ed.)	About 12% in 1986 focused on moderate expansion and universalising elementary education.	Increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 26.3% (2018) to 505 by 2035.
Higher Education Structure	10+2+3 system discipline specialisation	5+3+3+4 school system, flexible multidisciplinary degrees
Curriculum Flexibility	Limited flexibility. Rigid separation of streams (Arts, Science, Commerce) at the secondary level.	High flexibility. No rigid separation between arts, sciences, vocational, and curricular/extra-curricular streams. Credit transfer via the Academic Bank of Credit (ABC).
Regulatory Framework	Highly centralised, fragmented regulation with multiple bodies (UGC, AICTE, NCTE, etc.)	Single, unitary body: Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to be formed. The approach is *light but tight*.
Assessment / Evaluation	Primarily focused on summative assessment.	Shift to formative, competency-based assessment. Establishment of PARAKH (National Assessment Centre) for standard setting.
Research Emphasis	Limited emphasis: the main focus was on expanding teaching institutions.	Strong, institutional focus. Establishment of the NRE (National Research Foundation) to fund and promote research across all disciplines. Creation of Research Universities (MERUs)
Teacher Education	Focus on increasing the quantity of teachers and basic training.	Focus on quality, continuous professional development (CPD), and integration of teacher education into multidisciplinary institutions. 4-year integrated B.Ed. as the minimum degree by 2030.
Technology	Very limited	Strong integration (e-learning, digital platforms)
Vocational Education	Marginal Emphasis	Integrated into the curriculum and higher education.

The following chart is a graphic representation of 8 topics in comparison with the major education policies of India.

Comparison Chart of NPE 1986 & NEP 2020

■ Progressiveness Rating Out of 10 NPE 1986   ■ Progressiveness Rating Out of 10 NEP 2020

Comparative Analysis Table of NPE (1986) & NEP (2020)		
Salient Features	NPE (1986)	NEP (2020)
Policy Objective	Access, equity, quality retention	Access, equity, quality, research, innovation
Higher Education Structure	10+2+3 system, discipline specialisation	5+3+3+4 school system, flexible multidisciplinary degrees
GER Target	Approximately 12% in 1986 moderate increase	Multiple entry/exit, credit transfer via ABC
Curriculum Flexibility	Limited	Light but tight, more autonomy to institutions
Regulatory Framework	Centralised strict regulation	Strong focus on research innovation, MERUs
Research Emphasis	Limited focus on teaching	

Visual Graphic: NEP 1986 vs NEP 2020 Comparison

NEP 1986: Focused on expanding access to education in a newly developing India. Its priorities were literacy, equity, and enrollment growth, laying the foundation for mass education, whereas NEP 2020 aims to transform the quality and relevance of education in a globalised, digital era. It emphasises holistic learning, flexibility, technology integration, and preparing students for the 21st century (Farooqi, 2025).
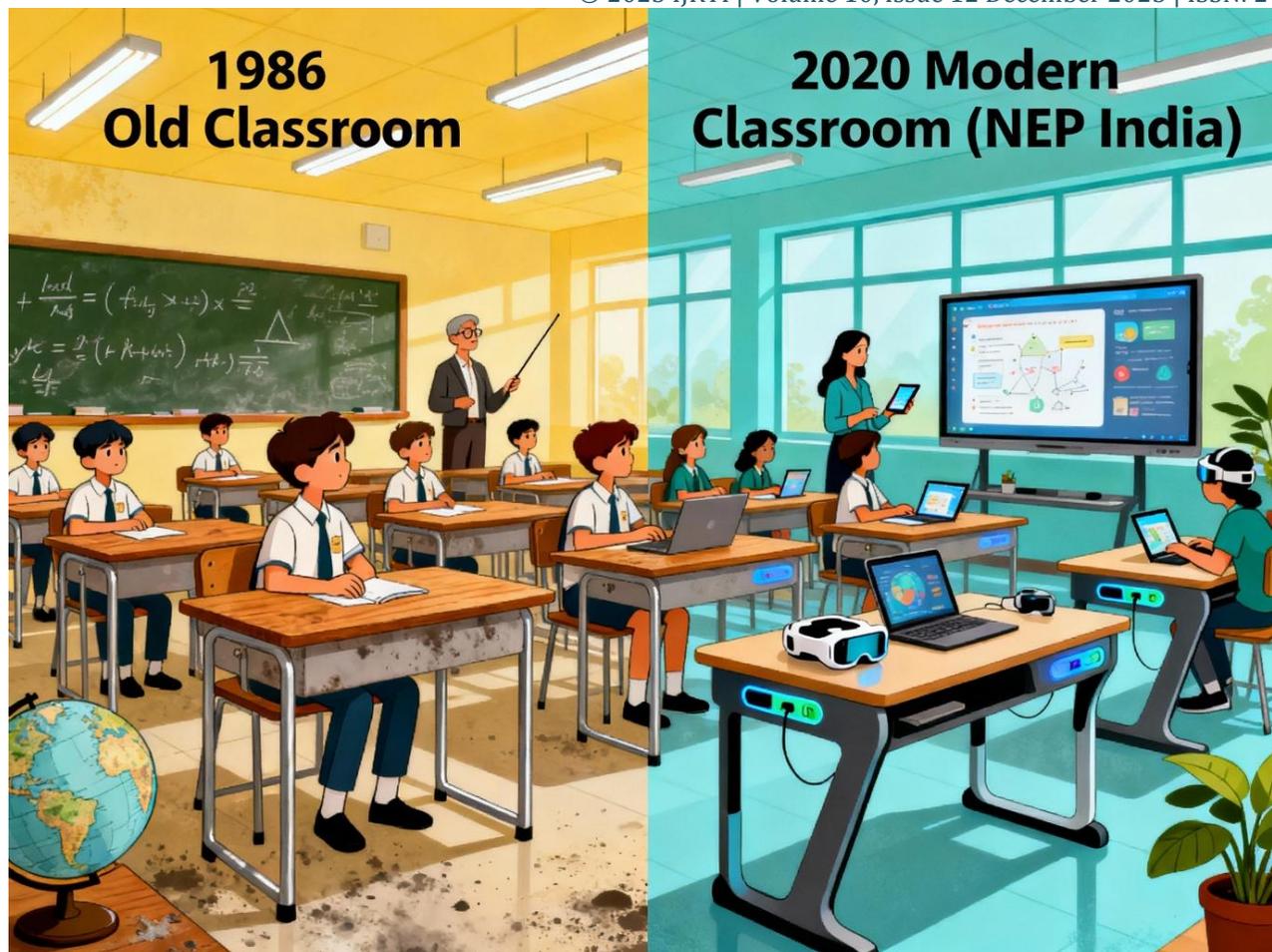
Overcoming Systemic Hurdles in Implementing NEP 2020

3.1. The Legacy of Challenges from NPE 1986

The implementation of NPE 1986 highlights the persistent gap between policy and practice in Indian education. Its call for 6% of GDP allocation was never realised, leaving the system underfunded and reforms stalled. While aiming at national integration and standardisation, the policy failed to address deep socio-economic inequalities. A content-heavy curriculum entrenched rote learning, creating a disconnect between vision and reality. These precedents show that India's greatest challenge in educational reform lies not in vision, but in overcoming systemic, financial, and human capital barriers to implementation.

3.2. Challenges of NEP 2020: The Hurdles to Realising the Vision

NEP 2020's transformative vision faces systemic hurdles similar to its predecessor. The most pressing challenge is financial: the unfulfilled 6% GDP allocation continues to undermine reforms, risking the policy's aspirations. Infrastructural gaps, especially in rural areas, limit technology integration and widen the digital divide. Human resource development is another obstacle, as educators require large-scale training and may resist pedagogical shifts. Finally, bureaucratic delays and the complexity of coordinating across diverse stakeholders threaten timely implementation (Ghatage, 2022).

Conclusion: A Forward-Looking Synthesis

The National Education Policy 2020 offers India a fresh opportunity to reshape education for the 21st century. While NPE 1986 laid the foundation for a unified system, its rigid structure, rote-heavy curriculum, and weak implementation limited its impact. NEP 2020 marks a paradigm shift toward a holistic, flexible, and outcome-based framework. For students, innovations like the Multiple Entry and Exit System, Academic Bank of Credits, and multidisciplinary curriculum promise unprecedented flexibility, while the proposed National Research Foundation aims to strengthen India's research ecosystem. Its integration of technology and recognition of an AI-driven future make it uniquely forward-looking (Kamalakar, 2021). Yet, challenges of funding, infrastructure, teacher training, and bureaucratic delays remain formidable. Ultimately, NEP 2020's success will depend not on its vision alone, but on the collective will and resources to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

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