

India's National Education Policies: A Comparative Analysis of 1968, 1986 and 2020

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Abstract

India's education policies have always been about more than just classrooms- they reflect the country's changing priorities. The 1968 policy focused on nation-building, equal access, and unity, though implementation remained weak. By 1986, attention shifted to expanding education, reducing inequalities, and improving access through targeted programmes, especially for disadvantaged groups. The 2020 policy reflects a modern, globalised India. It emphasises flexibility, skills, and real learning over rote methods, along with reforms like early childhood education and multidisciplinary higher education. It also gives teachers more freedom and highlights technology as a key tool. Overall, the shift is clear- from access to quality, and from state control to a more flexible system. However, like earlier policies, the biggest challenge remains effective implementation on the ground.

Keywords: Education Policy, Equity, Quality, NEP 2020, Nation Building

Introduction:

Education policy in India has not been just about classrooms, textbooks or examinations. From the very beginning, it is deeply tied to the idea of nation-building -shaping citizens, creating economic capacity, and responding to social inequalities inherited from colonial rule. The three National Education Policies adopted so far - in 1968, 1986 (revised in 1992), and 2020- reflect changing political priorities, economic realities, and global influences.

Historical Context of Education Policies in India

Each policy emerged from a distinct historical moment. The 1968 policy was framed in the optimism and anxiety of a newly independent nation struggling to unify itself. The 1986 education policy responded to concerns of equity, access, quality in a rapidly expanding educational system. The 2020 policy, introduced in a liberalised and globalised India, seeks to reimagine education for 21st

century economy. Here the "Teachers will be given more autonomy in choosing aspects of pedagogy, so that they may teach in the manner they find most effective for the students in their classrooms." (136–58)

A comparison of these policies reveals not just shifts in educational thinking, but also the evolving relationship between the state, the society and the individual.

National Education Policy 1968: A Unified System:

The National Education Policy, 1968 is seen as a need to building a Unified Nation. India's first National Education Policy was announced in 1968, following the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66). The commission's work was driven by a central question: how could education serve both democracy and development in a deeply unequal society?

At the time, literacy levels were low, regional disparities were sharp, and the education system still bore strong colonial imprints. The state viewed education as a public good and a primary responsibility of the government.

The 1968 policy had three dominant goals:

1. National integration
2. Social and economic development
3. Equalisation of educational opportunities

To achieve these, the policy emphasised a common school system, arguing that the children from varied social backgrounds should study together to reduce inequality. Though the idea was ambitious, its implementation remained limited due to political resistance and resource constraints.

One of the most important features of the 1968 policy was the formal adoption of the three-language formula:

- Hindi
- English
- A modern Indian language (preferably a regional language)

The formula was intended to balance national unity with linguistic diversity. However, in practice, it became a source of political tension, especially in non-Hindi-speaking states, where it was often resisted or selectively implemented.

The policy placed strong emphasis on science education, seeing it as essential for economic growth and technological self-reliance. Universities were encouraged to strengthen research, especially in scientific and technical fields. Teacher quality was also

highlighted, with calls for better training and professional standards, though systemic reforms in teacher education remained modest.

While visionary, the 1968 education policy suffered from weak execution. Financial allocation to education remained below the recommended 6% of GDP, a target that would be repeated in later policies. Moreover, the policy was largely silent on early childhood education and vocational learning, reflecting the priorities of the time. Still, the 1968 policy laid the ideological foundation for state-led educational expansion and equity.

National Education Policy 1986 (Revised 1992): Expansion

By the mid-1980s, India's education system had grown significantly, but problems of dropouts, gender inequality, rural-urban gaps, and declining quality had become glaring. The 1986 National Policy on Education, introduced under the Rajiv Gandhi government, attempted to address these concerns. "It certainly did not adopt any strategy of constituting either expert working groups or holding wide-ranging consultations akin to the Kothari Commission exercise. It is this report which provided broad policy directions and the foundation for preparing "The National Policy on Education , 1986." (Dewan, Hridaykant, and Archana Mehendale, 15–18)

Unlike the 1968 education policy, which was more philosophical in tone, the 1986 education policy was programmatic and interventionist.

A central focus of NPE 1986 was universal elementary education. The policy recognised that access alone was not enough; retention and learning outcomes mattered. This thinking later led to flagship programmes such as:

- Operation Blackboard
- District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)
- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

Special emphasis was laid on educating girls, the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities. The idea that education is a tool for social justice was by far more explicit than in 1968. This policy also gave importance to adult education, launching the National Literacy Mission. Literacy was seen not only as an academic skill, but also as a means of empowerment, especially for rural populations. A notable innovation was the establishment of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, residential schools aimed at

identifying and nurturing talented students from rural areas. This reflected a shift towards recognising merit beyond urban, elite spaces.

NPE 1986 acknowledged that teacher motivation and training were central to quality education. It called for:

- Better service conditions
- Continuous professional development
- Institutional autonomy for the higher education institutions

However, increasing bureaucratisation and political interference often undermined these goals.

The policy was revised in 1992, in the context of economic liberalisation. While the core structure remained intact, there was greater emphasis on decentralisation, private participation, and efficiency. Despite its comprehensive scope, NPE 1986 struggled with implementation. Quality remained uneven, and learning outcomes lagged behind enrolment gains. Nonetheless, it marked a decisive shift from elite education to mass education.

The first two National Education Policies were shaped by a strong belief in the state as the primary driver of educational change. They prioritised access, equity, and national cohesion, though with varying degrees of success.

National Education Policy 2020: Reform in Globalised Era

The National Education Policy, 2020, however, emerges from a very different India - one shaped by globalisation, digital technology, and market-oriented reforms. It promises flexibility, innovation, and learner-centricity, but also raises questions about implementation, federalism, and equity. "An open education pedagogical approach, or a more self-directed approach is likewise essential to foster openness in both praxis and culture." (Ebba, et al., 159–78)

When the National Education Policy, 2020 was unveiled, it was presented as a bold break from the past - the first comprehensive overhaul of education policy in over three decades. Unlike its predecessors, which emerged in an era dominated by state planning, NEP 2020 reflects an India shaped by economic liberalisation, digital technology, global competition, and demographic pressure.

The policy speaks the language of flexibility, innovation, skills, and multidisciplinary learning, signalling a philosophical shift from standardisation to choice. One of the most visible changes by NEP 2020 is the restructuring of the school education from the 10+2

system into a 5+3+3+4 model, corresponding to different stages of child development: Foundational (ages 3–8), Preparatory (8–11), Middle (11–14) and Secondary (14–18).

This change marks a clear departure from all the earlier policies that had largely ignored early childhood education. For the very first time, pre-school education is formally integrated into the national education framework, recognising that learning begins well before Class 1.

Language policy in NEP 2020 is framed with caution, mindful of earlier controversies. While it promotes the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction till at least Grade 5, it avoids making this mandatory. English continues to hold its place, reflecting social realities and parental aspirations. The emphasis is less on language as an identity marker and more on its role in cognitive development and comprehension. NEP 2020 repeatedly criticises rote learning and exam-centric education. It calls for:

- Competency-based learning
- Reduced syllabus load
- Continuous and formative assessment

Board examinations are to be redesigned to test understanding rather than memorisation. This echoes long-standing critiques of India's examination system, though similar intentions in earlier policies often faltered at the implementation stage.

Perhaps the most ambitious proposals of NEP 2020 concern higher education. The policy envisions:

- Multidisciplinary universities
- Flexible degree structures with multiple entry and exit options
- Academic Bank of Credits

This model is inspired partly by global higher education systems, particularly in United States and Europe. It represents a decisive move away from the old university regimes that have long characterised Indian universities. The policy also proposes the formation of a single regulatory body -Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) - replacing multiple overlapping regulators.

Teachers are positioned as the “heart of the education system,” with renewed emphasis on training, recruitment and autonomy. A new National Professional Standards for Teachers is proposed, along with integrated teacher education programmes. Technology is presented as a major enabler - from digital classrooms to online teacher training.

As Cecilia says "The context of teacher education and the roles of teachers require ever-increasing flexibility. This flexibility encompasses all areas of curriculum development, implementation and evaluation." (Olubunmi, 275–94)

The policy's optimism about technology reflects lessons from India's growing digital infrastructure, but it also raises concerns about the digital divide, particularly in rural and marginalised communities.

While NEP 2020 is expansive and aspirational, critics have raised several issues:

- Lack of clear financial commitment
- Risk of increased privatisation
- Challenges to federalism, as education is a concurrent subject
- Implementation capacity at the state level

As with earlier policies, the gap between intent and execution remains the central question.

Comparative Analysis of the Three Policies

A comparative reading of the three National Education Policies reveals both continuity and transformation in India's educational imagination. The 1968 policy placed the state at the centre of educational planning and provision. Education was seen as a public responsibility essential to nation-building. The 1986 policy retained this view but introduced targeted interventions and decentralised implementation. The 2020 policy, while not withdrawing the state, envisions a facilitator role, encouraging autonomy, private participation and institutional self-governance. This marks a clear ideological shift. Early policies focused heavily on access - enrolling children in schools and expanding institutions. NPE 1986, in particular, succeeded in dramatically increasing enrolment. NEP 2020, by contrast, concerns with the learning outcome and quality, responding to evidence that schooling has not met that meaningful learning that India requires today.

Key Issues and Challenges in Implementation

Equity runs as a thread through all three policies, but its articulation evolves over time.

- 1968 spoke of equal opportunity in broad terms.
- 1986 explicitly targeted disadvantaged groups through programmes and incentives.

- 2020 introduces the idea of “Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)”, using data-driven identification and targeted support.

Yet, critics argue that market-oriented reforms may unintentionally widen inequalities. As critics like Anand and Lall says "children – predominantly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds – are still experiencing poor-quality education which reduces their likelihood of achieving their learning potential" (Anand, Kusha, and Marie Lall, 24–55).

Language policy has remained politically sensitive. While 1968 attempted standardisation through the three-language formula, later policies adopted greater flexibility.

NEP 2020’s careful wording reflects lessons learnt from past resistance, opting for persuasion rather than prescription.

Perhaps the most telling difference lies in how each policy imagines the learner:

- 1968 saw the learner as a future citizen of a unified nation.
- 1986 viewed the learner as a participant in development and social justice.
- 2020 imagines the learner as a flexible, skilled individual navigating a globalised world.

Conclusion

India’s National Education Policies are best understood not as static documents, but as political and social texts, shaped by the aspirations and anxieties of their times. The journey from 1968 to 2020 reflects a shift from state-led idealism to market-aware pragmatism, from uniformity to flexibility, and from access to outcomes. Yet, a persistent theme remains: the challenge of bringing these policies into a classroom reality. Ultimately, the success of any education policy lies not in its language, but in its implementation, sustained funding, and democratic accountability. As India moves forward with NEP 2020, it carries the weight of both past lessons and future expectations.

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