

From Rote Learning to Holistic Development: A Critical Review of India's National Education Policy 2020

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Abstract—India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a historic shift in the country's educational philosophy, replacing the 34-year-old policy of 1986 with a vision aligned to 21st-century global, technological, and socio-cultural demands. This paper presents a comprehensive literary review of NEP 2020, drawing upon national and international scholarly studies published between 2019 and 2025. The study examines the policy's emphasis on holistic and multidisciplinary education, multilingualism, digital integration, vocational training, and research-oriented learning across school and higher education. Special attention is given to the evolving role of libraries as dynamic learning hubs that foster reading habits, critical thinking, research skills, and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. The paper also critically evaluates implementation challenges, including teacher preparedness, infrastructure gaps, multilingual content development, funding constraints, and employment alignment for multidisciplinary graduates. By synthesizing recent academic discourse, this review argues that NEP 2020 represents a transformative yet ambitious roadmap whose success depends on sustained policy support, institutional readiness, and inclusive execution. The paper concludes that NEP 2020 has the potential to redefine Indian education by nurturing culturally rooted, globally competent, and socially responsible learners.

Index Terms—National Education Policy 2020, Holistic Education, Multidisciplinary Learning, Libraries, Indian Languages, Educational Reform, Technology Integration

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. Critically examine the philosophical foundations and structural reforms proposed in NEP 2020.
2. Analyze the role of holistic and multidisciplinary education in transforming Indian learning ecosystems.
3. Review recent scholarly literature (2019–2025) on NEP 2020 and its implications.

4. Explore the significance of libraries, multilingualism, and technology in enhancing learning outcomes.
5. Identify challenges and prospects associated with the policy's implementation in India.

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a watershed moment in the history of Indian education. Introduced by the Government of India and approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020, the policy replaces the National Policy on Education (1986) and seeks to respond to the rapidly changing socio-economic, technological, and global realities of the 21st century. After more than three decades, the revision was necessitated by persistent challenges such as rote-based learning, rigid disciplinary boundaries, declining research output, linguistic alienation, and limited skill readiness among graduates. Developed through extensive consultations with educators, policymakers, and stakeholders, NEP 2020 envisions an education system that is inclusive, flexible, multidisciplinary, and learner-centric. Scholars such as Kalyani (2020), Sharma (2021), and Tilak (2022) emphasize that the policy attempts to align Indian education with global best practices while retaining indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values. Unlike earlier frameworks, NEP 2020 prioritizes conceptual understanding, experiential learning, multilingual competence, and critical thinking over examination-centric approaches.

Holistic and Multidisciplinary Framework of NEP 2020

NEP 2020 introduces a paradigm shift by dismantling rigid disciplinary silos and promoting integrated learning across arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences, vocational studies, and sports. The

restructured 5+3+3+4 school system emphasizes cognitive, emotional, ethical, and social development from early childhood onwards. Recent studies (NCERT, 2023; OECD, 2022) suggest that such integrated frameworks enhance learner engagement and adaptability. At the higher education level, the introduction of four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate programmes with multiple entry and exit options aims to reduce dropout rates and encourage lifelong learning. Research-oriented bachelor's degrees and flexible postgraduate pathways are expected to strengthen India's research ecosystem (Agarwal, 2021; Altbach & de Wit, 2023).

II. MULTILINGUALISM AND INDIAN LANGUAGES

A defining feature of NEP 2020 is its strong advocacy for mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least up to Grade 5, with flexibility beyond. Studies between 2019 and 2024 (UNESCO, 2021; Mohanty, 2022) affirm that early education in the mother tongue significantly improves comprehension, retention, and cognitive development. The policy's three-language formula, inclusion of classical and foreign languages, and recognition of Indian Sign Language reflect a commitment to linguistic diversity and cultural equity. NEP 2020 challenges the colonial legacy that privileged English over indigenous languages and aims to restore linguistic confidence among Indian learners.

III. ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Recent literature (Soni, 2023; IFLA, 2022) highlights NEP 2020's recognition of libraries as knowledge hubs rather than mere book repositories. The policy advocates digitization of library resources, access to e-books and e-journals, and community library engagement to foster reading culture and independent learning. Technology-enabled education, including online platforms, virtual labs, and digital repositories, gained unprecedented relevance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars (MHRD, 2021; World Bank, 2022) argue that NEP 2020's digital vision is essential for bridging access gaps, though it also raises concerns about the digital divide.

IV. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

NEP 2020 integrates vocational education into mainstream schooling from Grade 6 onwards, aiming to train at least 50% of learners in vocational skills by 2025–2035. Contemporary research (ILO, 2023; Kaushik, 2014) underscores the urgency of this reform, as India's labour market increasingly demands skill-based competencies.

V. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite its visionary framework, NEP 2020 faces several challenges:

1. Teacher Training and Capacity Building – Large-scale professional development is required to support pedagogical shifts (Tilak, 2022).
2. Infrastructure and Digital Divide – Unequal access to technology and libraries remains a major concern (World Bank, 2022).
3. Multilingual Content Development – Producing quality educational resources across Indian languages is complex and resource-intensive.
4. Funding Constraints – The proposed increase of education expenditure to 6% of GDP remains largely aspirational.
5. Employment Alignment – Clear career pathways for multidisciplinary graduates are still evolving.

VI. CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 stands as one of the most ambitious educational reforms in independent India. By advocating holistic development, multidisciplinary learning, multilingualism, vocational integration, and technology-driven education, the policy seeks to transform learners into critical thinkers, ethical citizens, and globally competent professionals. However, the success of NEP 2020 will ultimately depend on sustained political will, adequate funding, teacher preparedness, institutional autonomy, and societal acceptance. While the policy provides a visionary roadmap for the next two decades (2030–2040), its true impact will be measured by how effectively it translates into equitable and meaningful learning experiences across India's diverse educational landscape.

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