

Quest for Inclusivity and Access Equity in NEP-2020: Looking through the lenses of Political-Economy

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Abstract

Contemporary educational policy recommendations are too much inclined to and involved with the organizational efficiency to determine what actually comes out fruitful and the process by which the results can be reproduced. But it is a matter of concern that cognition to the fact that the institutions give out a range of personal and community purposes, is absent. The evaluation of the outcomes of education system has a compatibility linkage with the social and cultural norms greatly governed by socially and politically determined ethos.

Twenty first century researchers argue persuasively that the present public education policies are shaped up by a, “politics of educational productivity,” in which the “schools increasingly are asked to produce students who can perform well on rigorous tests”. Researchers have put forward variety of reasons instrumental for poor educational attainment in India such as lesser value put by uneducated parents to the children’s education, the low financial returns from education or the poverty and the economy of child labor etc. In such a backdrop, ‘NEP 2020’ came up with some neo-liberal trailblazing alteration in education policy after 34 years.

In this paper, an effort is made to gauge some crucial policy changes in ‘NEP 2020’ through the lens of Political Economy with an objective to review neo-liberal economic philosophy in the light of experience of last 30 years and some normative standpoint, too.

Keywords: Education Policy and System, Political Economy in Education, Policy Formation, NEP-2020

Background: Political Economy in Education

The recommendations made by existing educational policies are excessively focused on organizational efficiency and how to establish what is truly effective as well as how the results may be replicated. However, the lack of awareness of the institutions' distribution of various personal and communal goals is concerning. There are important questions that need to be answered, such as how education becomes an economic good. As a whole, education can be viewed in a variety of ways, including as a route for passing down cultural legacies across generations, a manufacturer of lasting goods, a system for dealing with the construction of human capital, and more. Achieving a lasting educational success may be the aim when policies are being formed, but students and households are more focused on the value of the services they receive, the rate of return on their educational investments, and occasionally the cultural values of receiving an education passed down through the generations. Regarding setting priorities, the main players in education have differing views, and in their desperation to create a solution that works for everyone, the policymakers are found to support policies that are incompatible.

Educational institutions cater variety of rationale in contemporary societies. Some immediate objectives are like building a healthy and productive atmosphere for children and other objectives, like being instrumental for creating improved civic cultures and productive economies, can only be fathomed decades later when the output of education system adopts their respective roles to shape up the modern society . The evaluation of the outcomes of education system has a compatibility linkage with the social and cultural norms greatly governed by socially and politically determined ethos.

According to scholarly research conducted in the present century ('J.G. Cibulka, 2001'), "schools are increasingly asked to produce students who can perform well on rigorous tests," which shapes public education policies today ('U.S.

Department of Education', 2000). However, among four different views of education as an economic good, productivity is only one important, long-lasting, and measurable effect, as demonstrated by test scores, as noted by 'D. Mitchell' (1998). In their extensive policy debates, political economists infer education as a durable asset, the future value of which is tied to its operational role in the job market or in warding off various forms of social malice that nag our communities. The present value of education can be measured through academic exams. Measurable advancements in education have not reached the expected level even after fifty years of independence (as the study of 1990s suggests) and the undoubted expansion of official educational outlets during that last fifty years. According to the 1991 census, the average number of years that people of age ≥ 25 years had attended school was just 2.4 years. Just 66 percent of pupils aged between 15-19 and 52% of students aged ≥ 7 years, were literate. The percentage of ladies and males in the ≥ 20 age group who have completed eight years of schooling is a pitiful 16 percent and 44 percent, respectively. Indian children's learning achievements are quite low as compared across different countries. Indian children had the second lowest mean score on scientific tests among students in 25 high- and low-income nations, according to data gathered in the early 1970s by the 'International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement' among those enrolled in school at the age ≥ 14 . Iran lagged behind India by a narrow score. Pupils from Japan had a mean score that was twice as high as pupils from India. ('Kingdon, G.G.', 1994). Many explanations have been proposed by researchers for the low educational attainment, including: (i) uneducated parents who place less value on their children's education ('Times of India', 1997) or the low financial returns from education in India ('Pradhan and Subramaniam', 1999); (ii) widespread poverty and the economy of child labor ('Campaign Against Child Labour', 1998); and (iii) inadequate infrastructure, insufficiency of teachers, and lack of instruction aids. Just 41 percent of primary schools have access to drinking water, 40 percent have roofs that are not leaky, and just 25 percent have at least two instructors ('Probe', 1999). (iii) the enormous private educational expense ('Tilak', 1996). The perspective

that acknowledges a number of significant supply and demand-side factors, such as household resources, parental motivation, the benefits of child labor, and school quality, among others, is addressed by 'Jean Drèze and Kingdon'. (2000). A few other noteworthy factors were also mentioned in the 'Probe Report' (1999), including the "burden of a dull and over-stretching curriculum" and the possibility of some important systemic elements like teacher accountability, the degree of democracy in the system, and the impact of teacher politics on the operation of the school, among others.

Backdrop of School Education prior to 'NEP 2020'

India embraced the global education development agenda in 2015, which is embodied in 'Sustainable Development Goal' -4. By 2030, it seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote opportunities for lifelong learning for all." To accomplish the vital targets and goals of the SDGs, such a massive and important goal necessitates a complete reconstruction and restructuring of the educational system to promote and foster learning. As the first education policy of the twenty-first century, 'National Education Policy' 2020 ('NEP-2020') offers this priority to the nation's emerging developmental demands.

From Table 1, we observe school participation rates among Dalits, Adivasis and Muslim communities during 2011-12 to 2016-17 have revealed some peculiar trends. For SCs the percentage of enrolment in both primary and upper primary level has dropped marginally during 2011/12-2016/17. The same trend is found for STs. But an improvement is found for the Muslims and OBCs during this phase. The percentage of OBC enrolment in secondary level in 2016-17 is appreciably at very high percentage of 45.72.

As per last census data, (*Table-2*) we observe a strong gender differential in terms literacy rate (Male- 80.9%, female-64.6%), the gap is more widened in rural area but lessened in urban level. The literacy rate among the marginalised social classes i.e SCs/STs (OBCs data were not categorised in Census) is comparatively low with a strong urban-rural divide.

Improvement in Gross Enrolment ratio is mostly observed in secondary education among all the social groups and across gender, during 2010/11 – 2014/15 (**Table-3**) in comparison to primary education and upper primary level, where fluctuations in GER is noticeable in time series data. But enrolment rates do not actually sketch the real scenario when there are sizable portion of dropout across the social groups and gender (**Table-4**). During 1990/91 - 2013/14, we observe 24.41 percent of girls drop out in 2007-08 before they complete the primary level. The D.O.R. for the boys and SC and ST girls are even worse in 2007-08. But the silver lining appears on later years as we perceive notable improvement in 2013-14. But for secondary level, it is still alarming as 18.96 percent for SC Boys and 18.32 percent for SC girls, 27.42 percent of ST Boys and 26.96 percent of ST girls and near about 18 percent of boys and girls drop out before they complete the secondary level, even in 2013-14.

National Education Policy 2020- Vision, Principles and Objectives

A. Vision:

1. An education system that gives everyone access to a top-notch education and therefore helps to create a fair and dynamic knowledge society.
2. Fosters a strong sense of patriotism, a clear understanding of one's place in a changing world, and a profound respect for the fundamental rights, obligations, and values enshrined in the Constitution.
3. Develops attitudes, abilities, and values that promote conscientious adherence to human rights, sustainable living and development, and the welfare of the world

B. Key Principles of NEP: School Education

Beginning with the change of name of the 'Ministry of Human Resource Development' to the 'Ministry of Education', the strategy announced certain significant adjustments to ensure the decentralization of the education system. The 'National Education Policy' of 2020 emphasizes the need of incorporating few crucial features as-

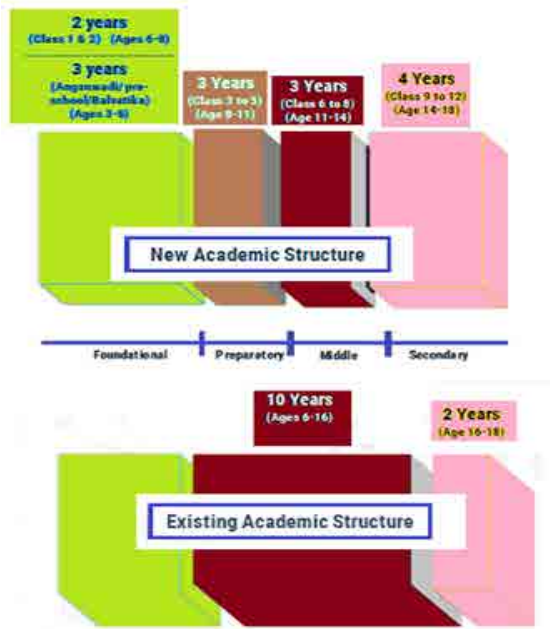
1. Incorporate respect for diversity and local context into curriculum, practice, and policies.
2. Prioritize equity and inclusion in educational decisions.
3. Encourage and facilitate philanthropic, private, and community participation.
4. Utilize technology for effective teaching and learning, language barrier removal for 'Divyang' students, and educational planning and management.
5. Prioritize conceptual understanding above routine or exam-oriented learning.
6. Recognizing and identifying each student's unique potential.
7. Fosters critical thinking and creativity, promoting rational decision-making and innovation.
8. Regularly reviewed by educational specialists based on research and assessments.

The policy paper demonstrates an aspiration to achieve the following objectives:

- I. Ensuring universal access to education from early childhood to secondary levels.
- II. Ensure equity and inclusivity.
- III. Return 2 crores out-of-school pupils.
- IV. Meet 'SDG' target of keeping all children in school until they complete secondary education.
- V. Improve learning outcomes for 'Foundational Literacy and Numeracy' (FLN).
- VI. Emphasize 21st century skills in teaching, learning, and assessment.
- VII. Resource Sharing in School Complexes.
- VIII. Effective Governance: Separation of powers and creation of common norms.
- IX. Overcoming language barriers in learning.

X. Common educational standards across public and private schools.

Figure -1: Academic Organization



Source: 'Policy Document, NEP- 2020',

The curriculum and pedagogical framework have undergone the following changes:

The new pedagogical and curricular structure for school instruction is intended as a system of 5+3+3+4. (Figure-1)- It begins with three years of 'Anganwadi' or preschool and twelve years of schooling. The thorough description of stages is designed as—

a. Fundamental Learning Curriculum for the age group of three to eight years divided into two parts:

(i) Children aged 3-6 years attend ECCE.

Prior to the age of five years: “Preparatory Class” or “Balvatika” (‘before Class 1’). This 5-year-old Foundational stage focuses on multi-level, play/activity-based learning.

(ii) Grades 1-2 for students aged 6-8 years.

b. Preparatory Stage (3 years) - Ages 8-11 years: Grades 3-5 with play, discovery, activity-based, and interactive learning.

c. Middle Stage (3 years): Age 11-14 years: Grade 6-8 with experiential learning in science, math, arts, social sciences, and humanities.

d. Secondary Stage (4 years): Age 14-18 years: Grade 9-12 - Multidisciplinary study, increased critical thinking, flexibility, and student choice of subjects.

“NEP 2020”: Looking Through the Lens of Political Economy

The Draft of ‘National Education Policy’ has revealed a strong evidences to follow the footsteps of the neoliberalism, and centralising tendencies that have been prevailing in higher education since the early 1990s. (‘D. Harvey’, 2005) One important recommendation of the NEP is to create a herd of students who are *job-ready*, and to make the education system the ‘*hub of the next industrial revolution*’. As it articulates, “*by focusing on such broad based, flexible, individualized, innovative, and multidisciplinary learning, higher education must aim to prepare its students not just for their first jobs- but also for their second, third and all future jobs over their lifetimes. In particular, the higher education system must aim to form the hub for the next industrial revolution.*” (‘MHRD’, 2019) Don’t we observe that this idea veils a lot more than what it spelt? It indirectly coded the philosophy that the future Govt. is going to shrug off the responsibility of employment provision and provide job security to future generations and the future participants to labor market must adopt themselves to the scary ‘hire and fire’ policies of corporates. As a result, we can detect a strong odor of a neoliberal capital manifesto through which the education system being shaped into. One would be perplexed by the articulation of ‘RTE’ when hints are made in the ‘NEP’ that education’s mission is solely for the growth of Industry, Trade and Commerce. This is an obvious violation

of the primary assumption of education, which is to produce a population that is socially conscious and capable of living a decent life. The Policy does not conform with the concept that basic education must be provided to all segments of the population, with access, equity, and inclusiveness as essential needs. The policy's educational goals benefit the wealthy classes who have had access to school for generations. Undoubtedly, achieving global standards is good, but it is critical and urgent to ensure that education reaches everyone in order to improve their lives. However, as expected, such normative issues were overshadowed by the call to relate education policy only to the labor market.

One important observation regarding this policy is that constitutional ideals were not given adequate consideration when developing it. Anticipating such a threat, the Constitution's writers included education in Part 4, making education vital to the nation's government. The two most major characteristics incorporated in the Constitution were secularism and socialism. However, the current political economic texture of the dominant groupings demonstrates that socialism is not deemed significant, and it also has major reservations about secularism. However, in a multi-religious and multi-textured cultural and social fabric like India, the strategy requires components of coherence in order to deal with diverse groups.

However, ignoring such thrusts in a school curriculum means that the nation is not interested in training its future peers to be responsive to the attribute of harmony and to recognize the right to be different.

The spearhead of the 'NEP 2020' is directed as more 'skill-driven' than to create enlightened citizen. The increased focus on vocational education from class 8 is basically a cockeyed and a gross deviation from the earlier ethos of Educational Policies where thrusts were given to the fresh intellects to get familiar to general education till Class 10. It is of no doubt that we require skills, but insufficiently educated skilled persons are incapable to womb the change philosophy. On the contrary, a cultural and intellectual inertia would prevail in such a situation which is more dangerous than the sluggish

growth rates. The distinction between education and skill can be categorized by the divide between mental and manual labor.

The policy supports for ‘substantial investment in a good, thriving public education as well as the encouragement and facilitation of true altruistic private and community participation’. The history of political economy demonstrates that philanthropy under the framework of neoliberalism is merely rhetoric. The approach also emphasizes a greater role for market forces. “NEP 2020” promotes ‘not-for-profit’ organizations while also advocating for a collaborative environment between commercial and public institutions that allows for fee charging without providing charge regulating mechanisms. Allowing for the investing of profits gained elsewhere in the same education sector can pave the way for the establishment of educational empires with other corporate assets. There is a trend noticed in various jurisdictions where business houses or groups control markets, education, and political power to define the norms governing these areas. It is similar to the formation of a wholesome legal and economic Mafiosi, as we saw with finance capital during and after World War II.

One of the weirdest realities in the social structure in India is that the obstacle before a child comes with his birth. That’s why social reformers, and sometimes the politicians, used the birth identity, to be more precise, caste criterion to measure the quantum of social disadvantage and designed policy in relation to that. Taking a total reversal to existing ethos, this policy conscientiously avoided any form of caste reference, excepting in few cases using terms like ‘social category’. “NEP 2020” document conveys the criterion of merit even for the ostracized social groups. This is unequivocally a crucial point of inflexion in terms of public policy designing, which is unprecedentedly skewed for the historically privileged societal as well as economic sets and a faint hint of scriptural agenda of power groups is perceptible. The reference of “ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought” as a “guiding light” of “NEP 2020”, can be traced as an indicative signs of majority revanchism in the sphere of education. On

the other hand, in a state of unequal access, technology as a force-multiplier can also expand the privilege-differential in the society.

The process of centralism of governance in education has been evident for quite long time. The crucial change being the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution in 1976, which brings education to the concurrent list from the State list and consequently shifting the balance in favor of the Union government. Alike NPE-1986, NEP- 2020 too continued this trend. Now how such a centralized system would perform in such a vast country with more than 1.3 billion people, with numbers of different languages, and with distinct regional histories, levels of economic and human development is truly a big question to be answered. It is also a matter of concern that how such a skewed system would act sensitive and elastic with respect to the 'local' context, needs and aspirations. It is also very difficult to discrete the roles for the states as an equal partner in the creation of the national regulatory framework. As education is a subject in concurrent list, the system calls for a monolithic cooperation in this federal structure. It is an issue to look out for in near future unless a well-synchronized agreement on the many crucial issues of NEP, 2020 is established.

The strategy plan proposes the establishment of a 'Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog', an apex organization led by the Prime Minister, to oversee the whole education sector, which raises serious concerns. The history of the United States of America and the former Soviet Union during the second quarter of the twentieth century shows that, despite having opposing political systems, these countries were able to maintain their knowledge systems beyond the intervention of political offices, resulting in their respective growth in science and technology. However, in 'NEP 2020', the policy contradicts this established premise. This is a clear threat to the education sector and constitutional values, since ruling parties will find ways to push their agenda through curricula.

Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that India was in dire need of an education policy as far as school and higher education is concerned. Since Globalization, the world has increasingly become a global village with larger integration of knowledge and systems. Dissemination of ideas and continuous structuring-restructuring, learning by doing, lifelong learning is the significant requisites for the success of present-day systems. The purpose of the education system is to produce engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged in our Constitution. In such circumstances, the Indian government has replaced a 34-year-old 'National Policy on Education' with the 'NEP-2020', which proposes significant improvements in elementary and secondary education, including teaching.

There would be no strict distinctions between arts and sciences, curricular and extracurricular activities, or vocational and academic streams under 'NEP 2020'. Students can choose their preferred subjects from the several streams. Vocational education will begin in schools in the sixth grade and will include internships. Board exams will continue, but they will be structured to promote holistic growth of pupils. A new national evaluation center, 'PARAKH', will be formed. Board exams will have fewer stakes.

But in presence of such 'holistic' attitude towards inclusiveness, the policy is constrained by some intrinsic challenges too. One of the biggest challenges to the Indian education system is the mismatch between jobs available and skill potential. 'NEP 2020' should have been more careful and objective in dealing this. Mobilization of required financial resources for funding the change, especially in terms of establishment of infrastructure for ECCE or creation of an 'inclusion fund' for the disadvantaged and excluded social groups could be the big thrust issues. On the other hand, technology, being a strong weapon in imparting inclusiveness, could also be a means of disparity in the face of 'non-egalitarian' access to it, across the socio-economic groups. It is irrefutable that the objective of national policies should be imparting equality in opportunity and inclusiveness, but by recurrent references

to “Indian-ness,” the policy sends a distinct hint for forced homogenisation. It should also be noted that the majoritarian philosophy of oneness by making ‘single size to fit for all’ might lead to susceptibility disorder in the thrive of excellence and internationalization through education system.

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Appendix Tables:

Table 1: Share of Enrolment from Marginalised Communities- All India-2011/12- 2016-17

	Share in Population (2001)	Share in Population (2011)	Primary Level (2011)	Upper primary (2011)	Primary Level (2016-17)	Upper primary (2016-17)	Secondary Level (2016-17)
SC	16.20	16.60	20.07	19.17	19.60	19.10	18.58
ST	8.20	8.60	11.54	9.43	10.60	9.90	8.44
Muslim	13.43	14.20	13.48	11.89	15.00	13.00	10.82
OBC	N/A	N/A	42.15	41.98	45.10	45.30	45.72

Source: Census Data (2001,2011), DISE Reports (2010-11,2016-17)

Table-2: Literacy Rate- Across Gender and Marginalised Group-Census 2011

	Total	Rural	Urban
Person	73.00	67.80	84.10
Male	80.9	77.2	88.8
Female	64.6	57.9	79.1
SCs/STs	66.1	62.8	76.2

Source: Census data, 2011

Table- 3: Gross Enrolment Ratio: By Social Groups and Gender- 2010/11 to 2014/15

Year	Level	General			SC			ST		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2010-11	Primary	114.90	116.30	115.50	130.60	132.20	131.40	137.20	136.70	137.00
2012-13		104.80	107.20	106.00	115.90	117.70	116.80	124.20	121.60	122.90
2014-15		98.90	101.40	100.10	110.70	113.20	111.90	110.60	108.20	109.40
2010-11	Upper	87.50	82.90	85.20	93.80	90.50	92.20	90.70	87.00	88.90
2012-13		80.60	84.60	82.50	96.70	103.00	99.70	97.10	99.90	98.40
2014-15		87.70	95.30	91.20	97.20	105.50	101.00	93.00	95.20	94.10
	Primary									

2010-11	Secondary	69.20	60.90	65.20	73.80	67.30	70.70	57.10	49.10	53.30
2012-13		69.60	67.00	68.10	77.60	75.14	76.46	64.03	59.70	62.03
2014-15		78.10	78.90	78.50	81.60	83.90	82.70	71.80	72.60	72.20

Source: - MHRD, GOI, EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS AT A GLANCE: National University of Educational Planning & Administration, New Delhi, Dec-2016

Table-4: Drop-out Rates in India by Social Groups and Gender, 1990/91 to 2013/14

	Years	All Boys	SC Boys	ST Boys	All Girls	SC Girls	ST Girls	Total
Primary (I-V)	1990-91	40.1	46.3	60.3	46	54	66.1	42.6
	2007-08	25.7	34.37	31.04	24.41	24.52	31.68	25.09
	2013-14	4.53	4.42	7.97	4.14	3.85	7.98	4.34
Elementary (I-VIII)	1990-91	59.1	64.3	75.7	65.1	73.2	82.2	60.9
	2007-08	43.72	53.56	62.62	41.34	51.12	77.97	52.3
	2013-14	3.09	3.75	8.03	4.49	5.04	8.85	3.77
Secondary (I-X)	1990-91	67.5	74.3	83.3	76.9	83.4	87.7	71.3
	2007-08	56.55	68.05	76.02	57.33	68.9	77.97	56.71
	2013-14	17.93	18.96	27.42	17.79	18.32	26.96	17.86

Source: Selected Educational Statistics (2010), GOI, EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS AT A GLANCE: National University of Educational Planning & Administration, New Delhi, Dec-2016