

Five Years of NEP 2020: An Assessment

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the Government of India in July 2020, was a historic reform in the field of education. It replaced the National Policy on Education of 1986 (modified in 1992) after more than three decades. During this long gap, Indian society, economy, and technology underwent major changes, yet the education system remained largely bound to outdated structures. The NEP 2020 emerged as a visionary document designed to transform India's education landscape, making it more holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and aligned with the needs of the 21st century. Five years have passed since its announcement, and this offers a valuable moment to assess how far its vision has been translated into action, what progress has been made, and what challenges remain unresolved.

At its core, NEP 2020 was guided by the idea that education should not merely be about acquiring degrees but about nurturing well-rounded individuals with critical thinking, creativity, ethical values, and global outlook. It sought to dismantle the rigid separation between curricular, extracurricular, and vocational education, emphasizing that every child's potential should be recognized and nurtured. The policy aimed to promote equity and inclusion, integrate technology in teaching and learning, strengthen research and innovation, and align Indian education with global benchmarks while also rooting it in the country's culture and traditions.

One of the most notable features of NEP 2020 was the restructuring of school education from the 10+2 model to a new 5+3+3+4 structure. This design recognized the importance of early childhood care

and education, placing children aged 3 to 8 in the "foundational stage." Over the past five years, many states have introduced preparatory classes or Bal Vatikas, and national programmes like NIPUN Bharat have been launched to improve

foundational literacy and numeracy. Studies show that India had long struggled with early-grade learning, as reflected in ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) findings where many students in grade 5 were unable to read a grade 2-level text. NEP's emphasis on foundational skills has therefore been timely and necessary. While improvements have been seen in some regions, the success of these reforms will depend on sustained teacher training, community engagement, and continuous assessment of learning outcomes.

Another important aspect was the recommendation to use the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction in the early grades. This was rooted in research which shows that children learn best in languages they understand well. In practice, however, this provision has been unevenly adopted. In rural areas, the policy has been welcomed, but in urban centers, many parents still prefer English-medium instruction for its perceived economic advantage. Some schools have attempted a balanced bilingual approach, but resistance remains, reflecting a broader tension between cultural preservation and global competitiveness.

The curriculum and pedagogy of schools have also undergone changes in line with NEP's vision.



CBSE and several state boards have moved toward competency-based questions and assessment rather than rote memorization. Subjects like coding, robotics, and vocational exposure are being introduced in middle school. Experiential and project-based learning has received greater attention, though the speed of adoption differs widely across regions. Importantly, the policy has sought to reduce the burden of board examinations by making them more application-oriented and less stressful, though deep-rooted exam-centric culture is still hard to dismantle.

In higher education, NEP 2020 envisioned a sweeping transformation. It proposed that by 2040, all higher education institutions should evolve into large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges, moving away from small, fragmented, single-stream institutions. Over the past five years, several universities have initiated restructuring to create multidisciplinary programs, and new institutions like the Indian Institutes of Skills and Indian Institutes of Translation and Interpretation are being planned. The introduction of multiple entry and exit options through the Academic Bank of Credits was one of the boldest reforms. It allows students to leave after one year with a certificate, after two years with a diploma, or after three years with a degree, while retaining the possibility of returning later to continue studies. This flexibility reflects global practices, though Indian universities have been slow to implement it fully due to administrative and structural challenges.

Research and innovation have also been emphasized. The National Research Foundation (NRF) has been established with the aim of funding quality research across disciplines, bridging the gap between industry and academia, and promoting a culture of inquiry. Similarly, the NEP opened the door for foreign universities to establish campuses in India. Guidelines have been issued, and some foreign institutions have shown interest, though the pace remains cautious. These steps are intended to enhance India's global competitiveness in higher education.

One of the most significant areas where NEP has shown impact is the integration of technology in education. The COVID-19 pandemic, which struck just months after the policy was announced, forced rapid digital adoption, and the NEP provided a guiding framework for this transformation. Platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM, as well as initiatives like PM eVidya, have expanded rapidly, offering digital courses, e-content, and teacher training modules. The National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR) has been launched to unify digital infrastructure, while online learning regulations have made it possible for students to pursue blended and remote learning models. However, the digital divide continues to limit the reach of these initiatives. Students in rural and marginalized communities often lack reliable internet access, electricity, or devices, creating a new form of inequality in education.

Teacher training and professional development, always a weak point in India's education system, have received renewed attention under NEP 2020. The introduction of the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) and the emphasis on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) seek to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to handle the demands of modern classrooms. Online training modules have reached large numbers of teachers, but more systematic investment in teacher recruitment, mentoring, and evaluation is needed. Without motivated and well-prepared teachers, even the most visionary policies will falter.

Equity and inclusion form another critical pillar of the NEP. The policy introduced initiatives such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, scholarships for disadvantaged groups, and special focus on open schooling and vocational training to bring back out-of-school children. In some states, these programmes have improved enrollment and retention, especially among girls and children from marginalized communities. Yet challenges persist. Gender disparities, rural-urban gaps, and socio-economic inequalities remain deeply entrenched, limiting the

reach of reforms. The dropout rates in secondary schools, especially among girls in rural areas, continue to be a concern.

After five years, the NEP's achievements are visible in some areas. Foundational literacy and numeracy have gained unprecedented national attention. Digital platforms for both school and higher education have expanded rapidly. Curriculum reforms have begun to make learning more practical and less memory-based. Indian knowledge systems, yoga, and traditional languages are receiving renewed emphasis. The internationalization of higher education, though still in early stages, has set the groundwork for India's integration into global education networks.

However, the challenges cannot be overlooked. Implementation has been uneven across states due to India's federal structure, where education is a concurrent subject. States vary in their resources, priorities, and political will, leading to patchy adoption of reforms. Financial constraints are another major hurdle, as the policy's ambitious targets require significantly higher public investment in education. The policy recommended increasing public spending to 6 percent of GDP, but India still spends around 3 percent to 3.5 percent. Without adequate funding, reforms risk being superficial. Moreover, resistance to change has slowed progress. Many schools and colleges continue with traditional teaching methods, reluctant to adopt new assessment styles or flexible curricula. Parents too, accustomed to exam-oriented systems, often resist changes. The digital divide and infrastructural deficiencies in rural areas continue to marginalize millions of students. Teacher shortages and overburdened classrooms dilute the impact of reforms.

In comparative terms, NEP 2020 borrows ideas from international models such as Finland's emphasis on flexible, child-centric education, the United States' multidisciplinary universities, and China's use of technology for mass education. Yet India's context of

vast diversity, scale, and socio-economic disparity makes implementation uniquely difficult. Unlike OECD nations, India faces the dual challenge of expanding access to millions still outside the formal system while simultaneously raising quality standards to compete globally.

Looking ahead, the success of NEP 2020 depends on translating its vision into concrete, measurable outcomes. Stronger implementation mechanisms are needed, with clear timelines, accountability systems, and monitoring frameworks. Greater investment in teacher preparation, research, and infrastructure is essential. Public-private partnerships can play a role in enhancing vocational education, technology adoption, and higher education research. Bridging the digital divide must be a national priority so that rural and marginalized students are not left behind. Inclusive education must remain at the center, ensuring that disadvantaged groups, especially girls, differently-abled learners, and those from economically weaker sections, are able to benefit equally.

In conclusion, the first five years of NEP 2020 reveal a policy that is both ambitious and necessary. Its achievements in areas such as foundational literacy, digital learning, and curriculum reform are encouraging, yet much of its potential remains unrealized due to systemic barriers. The NEP must be understood not as a quick fix but as a long-term roadmap, whose success will require sustained political will, cooperative federalism, and active involvement of educators, parents, and communities. If pursued with dedication and adequate resources, NEP 2020 has the potential to make India's education system globally competitive, culturally rooted, and inclusive, preparing the nation's youth for the challenges of the 21st century.
