

# Changing Paradigm in Indian Education Through a Comparative Study of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020

**Sheauli Das**

**Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kalyani,  
Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal**

## **Abstract :**

This study investigates the transformation in the Indian education system through a comparative analysis of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. Educational policies play a crucial role in shaping the direction and development of a nation's education system. Over the years, India has introduced several reforms to address emerging social, economic, and technological challenges. Among these, NPE 1986 and NEP 2020 represent two important milestones that reflect the evolving priorities of Indian education.

The main objective of this study is to examine the changing paradigm in Indian education by comparing the objectives, structural provisions, and educational philosophies of these two policies. The study adopts a qualitative and comparative research approach based on the analysis of policy documents and secondary sources such as books, research articles, and government reports. The analysis focuses on key aspects including educational structure, curriculum design, teaching-learning approaches, skill development, technology integration, and research orientation.

The findings indicate a significant shift in the focus of Indian education policy from expanding access and reducing disparities under NPE 1986 to promoting quality, innovation, flexibility, and multidisciplinary learning under NEP 2020. The introduction of the 5+3+3+4 curricular framework, emphasis on early childhood education, skill-based learning, and digital technology reflects a broader and more progressive vision for education. Overall, the study highlights the evolving nature of Indian educational policy in response to changing national and global needs.

**Key words:** National Policy on Education 1986, National Education Policy 2020, Indian Education System, Educational Reform, Comparative Study, Educational Policy, Paradigm Shift,

## **Introduction**

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental force in the advancement of a nation's social, economic, and cultural progress. A strong education system not only develops human resources but also contributes to national development and social transformation. In India, educational policies have been periodically formulated to respond to emerging societal needs and challenges while guiding the development of an equitable and effective education system. Among the various reforms introduced over time, the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020 stand out as two landmark initiatives that illustrate the evolving vision and priorities of the Indian education system across different historical contexts.

The National Policy on Education 1986 was implemented with the aim of expanding educational opportunities, ensuring social justice, and strengthening the overall framework of the education system in India. The policy placed significant emphasis on the universalization of elementary education, promotion of adult literacy, and

improvement of teacher education. It also highlighted the role of education in fostering national unity and social integration. Furthermore, the policy sought to reduce educational inequalities by providing greater support to marginalized sections of society, including women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and rural communities. During this period, the education system in India largely followed conventional teaching practices and a relatively rigid curriculum structure.

With the passage of time, rapid developments such as globalization, technological innovation, socio-economic transformation, and the emergence of a knowledge-driven economy created new expectations from the education sector. In response to these changing demands, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy 2020 with the objective of bringing comprehensive reforms to the education system. This policy envisions an education framework that is holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and learner-oriented. It emphasizes the development of critical thinking, creativity, skill-based learning, and the effective integration of digital technology in education. The policy also proposes significant reforms in both school and higher education systems.

The transition from the National Policy on Education 1986 to the National Education Policy 2020 indicates a notable shift in the philosophy, objectives, and organization of education in India. While the earlier policy mainly concentrated on expanding access and strengthening the educational infrastructure, the newer policy focuses more on improving quality, encouraging innovation, and enhancing global competitiveness. In addition, NEP 2020 introduces important structural changes such as the 5+3+3+4 curricular framework, greater integration of vocational education, the promotion of mother-tongue instruction in the early years of schooling, and increased emphasis on research, creativity, and multidisciplinary learning.

In this context, conducting a comparative analysis of these two major policies becomes essential for understanding how educational priorities and strategies have evolved in India over time. Such a comparison provides valuable insights into the transformation of policy perspectives, goals, and implementation approaches. It also helps in examining how educational reforms respond to the dynamic needs of society and the challenges posed by global developments.

Therefore, the present study seeks to explore the changing paradigm in Indian education through a comparative examination of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. By analyzing the similarities, differences, and innovative features of these two important policy frameworks, the study aims to highlight the evolving nature of the Indian education system and its future trajectory.

## Review of Related Literature

**Anil Sadgopal (1991)** in his paper “Education for Equality: Reflections on the National Policy on Education 1986” critically examined the objectives of NPE 1986. The author highlighted that the policy aimed to ensure equal educational opportunities and reduce social disparities in education. However, the study also pointed out challenges related to implementation and resource allocation.

**Jandhyala B. G. Tilak (1993)** in his research article “*Education Policy in India: Critical Issues and Challenges*” analyzed the major provisions of NPE 1986 and discussed its role in expanding access to education and promoting social justice. The study emphasized the importance of public investment in education for achieving policy goals.

**Krishna Kumar (2005)** in the book “*Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*” discussed the ideological foundations of Indian educational policies and examined how policies such as NPE 1986 influenced curriculum and educational priorities in the country.

**Rukmini Banerji (2013)** in the report “*Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)*” analyzed the quality of school education in India and highlighted the need for reforms to improve learning outcomes. The findings suggested that access to schooling had increased significantly after NPE 1986, but challenges related to quality and learning remained.

**Kasturi Rangachari Rangachari (2020)** as the chairperson of the committee that drafted the National Education Policy 2020 presented the report “*National Education Policy 2020*”. The report emphasized the need for holistic and multidisciplinary education, early childhood care and education, and the integration of technology into the education system.

**Poonam Batra (2020)** in her article “*Teacher Education and the National Education Policy 2020*” discussed the reforms proposed in NEP 2020 related to teacher training and professional development. The study emphasized that improving teacher quality is essential for successful implementation of the policy.

**Geeta Kingdon (2020)** in her paper “*The Impact of the National Education Policy 2020 on the Indian Education System*” analyzed the potential implications of NEP 2020 for improving educational quality, governance, and institutional autonomy

## Research Gap

A number of scholars have explored various dimensions of educational policy development in India, with particular attention to the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. Earlier research has largely concentrated on examining the goals, major provisions, and anticipated outcomes of these policies individually. Studies related to the National Policy on Education 1986 emphasize its contribution to expanding educational opportunities, promoting social equity, and laying a strong foundation for the growth of the Indian education system.

In a similar manner, recent scholarly work has focused on evaluating the features and possible implications of the National Education Policy 2020. These studies highlight its emphasis on holistic development, interdisciplinary learning, skill-oriented education, and the integration of modern technology in the teaching–learning process. Researchers also point out that the policy seeks to bring the Indian education system in line with contemporary global educational practices and emerging knowledge economies.

Despite the growing body of literature on these policies, comprehensive comparative analyses that specifically investigate the changing paradigm of Indian education remain relatively scarce. Much of the existing research tends to examine each policy independently rather than undertaking a systematic comparison of their philosophical orientation, structural reforms, curriculum frameworks, and policy objectives. Consequently, there is a clear need for an in-depth comparative study that explores how the vision, priorities, and strategic approaches of educational policy in India have transformed between 1986 and 2020. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the paradigm shift reflected in these two significant educational policy frameworks.

## Research Questions

1. What are the key aims and major characteristics of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020?
2. In what ways are these two education policies similar, and how do they differ from each other in terms of their goals and provisions?

3. How has the vision, structure, and orientation of the Indian education system evolved between 1986 and 2020?

4. What significant changes in educational philosophy and policy perspective are evident in NEP 2020 when compared with NPE 1986?

## Methodology

### Research Design

The present research employs a qualitative research design to explore the transformation in the Indian education system through an examination of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. The methodological framework is designed to study and compare the goals, structural features, and significant provisions of these two major education policies.

### Data Collection

The research relies mainly on secondary sources of information. Data have been obtained from official policy documents, government publications, academic books, scholarly articles, research journals, and other relevant literature related to educational policy in India. Information for the study was collected through a detailed examination of documentary sources. Important documents analyzed include the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020, along with various reports, academic studies, and publications that discuss the objectives and implications of these policies.

### Data Analysis

The collected information was interpreted using a comparative analytical approach. Both policies were examined on several key dimensions such as educational aims, organizational structure of the education system, curriculum design, teaching and learning practices, technological integration, vocational education, emphasis on research, and strategies for policy implementation.

### Analysis and Interpretation

**Analysis and Interpretation Research Question 1 :** The National Policy on Education 1986 was formulated to reinforce the overall framework of the Indian education system while ensuring that educational opportunities were accessible to every segment of society. The policy mainly concentrated on achieving universal elementary education, reducing inequalities within the education system, encouraging adult literacy, and strengthening the quality of teacher education. It also highlighted the role of education in promoting national unity, preserving cultural heritage, and cultivating a scientific outlook among learners. Furthermore, the policy gave priority to socially and economically disadvantaged groups, including women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and rural populations, with the aim of fostering inclusive and equitable educational progress.

In comparison, the National Education Policy 2020 represents a broader and more reform-oriented vision for the Indian education system. The policy seeks to establish an education framework that is holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and centered on the needs of learners. It emphasizes the development of analytical thinking, creativity, practical skills, and the effective use of digital technology in teaching and learning. Additionally, NEP 2020 introduces significant reforms such as the **5+3+3+4 school structure**, a stronger focus on early childhood care and education, the promotion of multidisciplinary higher education, and a greater emphasis on

research and innovation. Through these initiatives, the policy aims to equip students with the competencies required to succeed in a rapidly evolving 21st-century knowledge-based society.

**Analysis and Interpretation Research Question 2 :** Although these two education policies were developed in different historical periods, they share several similar goals. Both the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020 aim to improve the overall standard of education, expand educational opportunities for all citizens, support national progress, and enhance the quality of teacher education. In addition, both policies acknowledge the important role of education in promoting social equality and strengthening national unity.

At the same time, significant differences can be observed between the two policies. The National Policy on Education 1986 mainly concentrated on increasing access to education and developing the basic educational infrastructure, since the country was facing serious challenges related to illiteracy and unequal educational opportunities during that period. In contrast, the National Education Policy 2020 places greater emphasis on improving the quality of education, encouraging innovation, enhancing global competitiveness, and promoting skill-oriented learning. Moreover, NEP 2020 introduces contemporary educational ideas such as digital learning, interdisciplinary education, and flexible curriculum structures, which were not major priorities in NPE 1986.

**Analysis and Interpretation Research Question 3:** The perspective and priorities of the Indian education system have undergone significant transformation over the last three decades. During the time of the National Policy on Education 1986, the major concern was to broaden access to education and ensure that every citizen received basic schooling and literacy. The policy concentrated on building and strengthening educational infrastructure while promoting equal educational opportunities among various social groups.

By the time the National Education Policy 2020 was introduced, the focus of the education system had expanded considerably. The policy presents a more comprehensive vision that emphasizes not only access but also the quality of education, innovation in teaching and learning, and the overall development of learners. One of the major structural reforms introduced by NEP 2020 is the replacement of the traditional **10+2 system** with the **5+3+3+4 curricular framework**, which is designed to correspond with the cognitive and developmental stages of children. Furthermore, the policy promotes flexible subject selection, encourages multidisciplinary learning, and integrates vocational education within the mainstream system, thereby making education more adaptable, practical, and student-centered.

**Analysis and Interpretation Research Question 4:** A clear shift in educational philosophy becomes evident when comparing the approaches of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. The earlier policy mainly concentrated on expanding educational opportunities through government initiatives and addressing issues related to access and social equity. Its structure was largely centralized, and the teaching–learning process generally followed conventional methods in which teachers played the dominant role in classroom instruction.

In contrast, NEP 2020 reflects a more modern and student-focused philosophy of education. It promotes experiential and activity-based learning while encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and the development of competencies required for the 21st century. The policy also advocates greater institutional autonomy, supports multidisciplinary approaches to learning, and emphasizes the role of research and innovation in higher education. In addition, it encourages the effective use of digital technologies and seeks to create an education system that is more flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of learners.

Therefore, a comparison of these two policies reveals a substantial transformation in the aims, structure, and guiding principles of the Indian education system. The transition from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020 illustrates the country's attempt to reshape its education framework in response to evolving social conditions, technological progress, and global educational developments.

## Findings of the study

The present research explored the transformation in the Indian education system by conducting a comparative examination of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. After analyzing the objectives, characteristics, and structural provisions of both policies, several important findings were identified.

### Shift from Expansion to Quality Enhancement

The analysis indicates that the National Policy on Education 1986 mainly concentrated on widening access to education and addressing problems related to illiteracy and unequal educational opportunities. In contrast, the National Education Policy 2020 places greater importance on improving educational quality, encouraging innovation, and developing competencies needed in a knowledge-driven society.

### Reorganization of Educational Structure

The study highlights a major transformation in the structural framework of education. While NPE 1986 followed the conventional **10+2 system**, NEP 2020 introduces the **5+3+3+4 curricular structure**, which is designed to match the developmental stages of children and improve the effectiveness of the learning process.

### Promotion of Holistic and Interdisciplinary Learning

The findings suggest that NEP 2020 encourages a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary model of education. It allows learners to explore diverse subject areas and promotes flexibility in academic choices, whereas the earlier policy maintained a more fixed and subject-specific educational framework.

### Greater Importance of Skills and Vocational Training

Another important observation is that NEP 2020 strongly supports skill-based education and the inclusion of vocational training within the formal education system. In comparison, the National Policy on Education 1986 provided comparatively less attention to vocational and practical skill development.

### Expansion of Technology in Education

The study also reveals that technology plays a much larger role in NEP 2020. The policy encourages digital learning, online educational platforms, and the use of technological tools to enhance teaching and learning practices. Such technological integration was not a major focus in NPE 1986.

### Shift in Teaching and Learning Practices

A noticeable change can be observed in the approach to teaching and learning. Under NPE 1986, instructional practices were largely teacher-centered. In contrast, NEP 2020 promotes learner-centered approaches, including experiential learning, activity-based instruction, and critical thinking.

## Recognition of Early Childhood Education

The findings show that NEP 2020 places significant emphasis on early childhood care and education, recognizing it as a crucial stage in a child's learning journey. This area received comparatively less attention in the National Policy on Education 1986.

## Encouragement of Research and Innovation

The study further indicates that NEP 2020 gives considerable importance to research, innovation, and the development of higher education institutions as hubs of knowledge creation. Such a strong focus on research was relatively limited in the earlier policy.

## Common Goals in Educational Development

Despite the differences in approach and structure, both policies share certain fundamental objectives. These include promoting equitable access to education, strengthening teacher education, and using education as a means to achieve national progress and social development.

## Overall Transformation in Educational Policy

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Indian educational policy has undergone a substantial transformation over time. The transition from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020 reflects a shift from a focus on expansion and accessibility toward an emphasis on quality, flexibility, innovation, and international competitiveness in education.

## Conclusion

The present research explored the evolution of the Indian education system by conducting a comparative study of the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Education Policy 2020. The analysis illustrates how the priorities, policy orientations, and structural arrangements of education in India have gradually changed in response to shifting national requirements and global developments. The findings suggest that the National Policy on Education 1986 made a crucial contribution to strengthening the basic framework of the Indian education system. It mainly aimed to expand access to education, promote social equality, and reduce problems related to illiteracy and educational disparities. The policy sought to ensure that educational opportunities were available to all sections of society and to support national progress through the development of human resources.

In comparison, the National Education Policy 2020 presents a more progressive and future-oriented vision for the education sector. It seeks to develop an education system that is comprehensive, flexible, multidisciplinary, and focused on the overall growth of learners. The policy introduces significant reforms such as the **5+3+3+4 curricular framework**, greater emphasis on early childhood care and education, promotion of skill-oriented learning, and wider use of technology in the teaching–learning process. These initiatives aim to prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

The comparative examination also indicates that although both policies share certain fundamental objectives—such as improving educational standards, ensuring equity, and strengthening teacher education—their strategies and areas of emphasis differ considerably. While the earlier policy concentrated largely on increasing educational access and building infrastructure, the recent policy gives more importance to quality improvement, innovation, research, and global competitiveness.

In conclusion, the transition from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020 clearly reflects a major shift in the philosophy and direction of Indian education policy. This transformation demonstrates India's effort to modernize its education system in response to changing social conditions, technological progress, and the evolving demands of the global knowledge economy. If effectively implemented, the new policy has the potential to significantly improve the quality, inclusiveness, and relevance of education in India.

## References

- Anil Sadgopal. (2010). The national policy on education and its implications for equality and social justice in India. *Social Scientist*, 38(9–10), 17–32
- Arun C. Mehta. (2018). *Elementary education in India: Progress towards universalization*. National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration
- Banerji, R. (2013). *Annual status of education report (ASER)*. Pratham Education Foundation
- Banerji, R. (2013). *Annual status of education report (ASER)*. Pratham Education Foundation
- Dey, N. (2022). National education policy 2020 on transforming education: A critical analysis of recommendations on school, teacher and higher education. *Journal of Indian Education*, 48(1), 187–200.
- Geeta Gandhi Kingdon. (2020). The potential impact of the national education policy 2020 on education reform in India. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(5), 1–12
- Govinda, R. (2017). *India education report: Quality and equity challenges*. Oxford University Press
- Jain, S. B. (2023). Impact of new education policy 2020 on education. *Elementary Education Online*, 19(4), 3505–3519
- Jandhyala B. G. Tilak. (1993). Education policy and development in India. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 13(1), 23–35
- Kasturi Rangachari Rangachari. (2019). *Draft national education policy 2019*. Government of India.
- Krishna Kumar. (2005). *Political agenda of education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas*. Sage Publications
- Mehrotra, S. (2020). National education policy 2020: A critical review. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(35), 20–23
- Poonam Batra. (2020). Teacher education in the context of the national education policy 2020. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(34), 15–18
- Rukmini Banerji. (2013). *Annual status of education report (ASER)*. Pratham Education Foundation.
- Santosh Mehrotra. (2020). National education policy 2020: A critical review. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(35), 20–23



## Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.