



NEP 2020 and the Politics of Educational Reform in India: Federalism, Governance and Ideological Transformation

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18950434>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 25-02-2026

Published: 10-03-2026

Keywords:

National Education Policy 2020, Educational Reform, Federalism, Language Politics, Ideology, Political Economy, India.

ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most comprehensive restructuring of India's education system since the National Policy on Education (1986). Presented as a transformative reform agenda aimed at enhancing access, quality, equity, and global competitiveness, NEP 2020 introduces structural changes in school and higher education, regulatory consolidation, multidisciplinary learning, digital integration, and institutional autonomy. However, educational reform in India is inherently political, embedded in federal relations, language debates, ideological contestation, and market-oriented governance shifts. This paper critically examines NEP 2020 as both a developmental policy and a political project. Using qualitative analysis of secondary data, including official policy documents, AISHE and UDISE+ statistics, parliamentary debates, and academic scholarship, the study argues that NEP 2020 reflects broader transformations in governance centralization, identity politics, and neoliberal restructuring. The paper concludes that the success of NEP 2020 depends on cooperative federalism, equitable financing, and democratic engagement in implementation.

Introduction

Education has always played a foundational role in shaping democratic societies, fostering economic development, and constructing national identity. In post-independence India, educational



reforms have been closely linked with state-building efforts and social justice initiatives. From the University Education Commission (1948-49) to the National Policy on Education (1986), successive governments attempted to expand access and improve quality. However, systemic challenges such as low learning outcomes, regulatory fragmentation, uneven infrastructure, and growing privatization persisted.

In July 2020, the Government of India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi adopted the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a transformative reform blueprint. Replacing the 1986 policy, NEP 2020 envisions India as a “global knowledge superpower” by 2040. It proposes structural reorganization of school education, comprehensive higher education reforms, digital integration, emphasis on Indian knowledge systems, and consolidation of regulatory bodies.

While the policy has been widely welcomed for its ambition, it has also generated significant political debate. Educational policy in India cannot be detached from federal relations, language politics, and ideological contestation. Education is placed in the Concurrent List of the Constitution following the 42nd Amendment (1976), meaning both Union and State governments share authority. Consequently, large-scale reforms often trigger centre–state tensions. This paper examines NEP 2020 as a site of political negotiation, analyzing how educational reform intersects with governance centralization, cultural identity, and market-oriented restructuring.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine the structural and institutional reforms proposed under NEP 2020 in school and higher education.
2. To analyze the implications of NEP 2020 for Indian federalism and centre–state relations, particularly regarding curriculum control and regulatory authority.
3. To evaluate the political and cultural dimensions of language policy embedded in NEP 2020.
4. To assess the political economy of privatization, institutional autonomy, and commercialization in the education sector.
5. To explore the ideological implications of curriculum reform and the integration of Indian knowledge systems.



Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative analytical approach based exclusively on secondary data. The primary sources include the official National Education Policy 2020 document published by the Ministry of Education, reports from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+), parliamentary discussions, and policy briefs from research institutions. Academic journal articles, books on educational governance, and newspaper editorials were also reviewed.

The study employs document analysis and thematic content analysis to interpret the policy's provisions and associated political debates. Statistical data from AISHE and UDISE+ are used descriptively to contextualize reform claims. No primary field data were collected; instead, the study synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical scholarship to construct a critical analytical narrative.

Theoretical Framework

A rigorous understanding of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 requires situating it within broader theoretical debates in political science and sociology of education. Educational reform is not merely administrative restructuring; it reflects shifts in political economy, governance models, ideological state functions, and identity politics. This study adopts three interrelated theoretical lenses: political economy of education, federalism and governance theory, and the concept of ideological state apparatus.

Political Economy of Education

Educational reform is deeply embedded in the political economy of the state. The political economy perspective emphasizes how economic ideologies, market structures, and governance transformations shape public policy outcomes. In India, the economic liberalization reforms of 1991 marked a structural shift from a state-led development model to a market-oriented framework emphasizing privatization, deregulation, fiscal discipline, and global integration. These reforms significantly influenced the education sector.

Post-1991, higher education witnessed rapid privatization, reduced public investment relative to expansion needs, and growing reliance on private and self-financing institutions. The shift toward performance metrics, accreditation systems, and institutional autonomy reflects global neoliberal governance models that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and competition. International financial



institutions and global policy discourse have long promoted such frameworks under structural adjustment paradigms (Carnoy, 1995).

NEP 2020 aligns with this trajectory. The policy advocates graded autonomy for institutions based on accreditation, performance-linked funding mechanisms, public–private partnerships, and philanthropic private investment. The emphasis on transforming higher education institutions into self-governing entities with minimal state interference in academic matters reflects a managerial governance model. However, while operational autonomy is encouraged, regulatory oversight is simultaneously centralized, producing a hybrid governance structure.

The political economy critique suggests that such reforms may intensify inequalities. In contexts where public financing remains insufficient—India’s education expenditure has historically hovered below the recommended 6% of GDP—greater autonomy may translate into increased fee structures, commercialization, and exclusion of marginalized communities. Thus, NEP 2020 reflects broader tensions between market efficiency and social justice within a liberalizing economy.

Federalism and Governance Theory

India’s constitutional design embodies a quasi-federal structure with a strong center. Education, originally a State List subject, was transferred to the Concurrent List through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976. This shift institutionalized shared jurisdiction between the Union and state governments, making education a domain of cooperative yet often contested federalism.

Governance theory highlights the balance between decentralization and central coordination. NEP 2020 must be analyzed within this dynamic. On one hand, the policy emphasizes institutional autonomy and decentralization at the school complex and university level. On the other hand, it proposes centralized regulatory restructuring, national curriculum frameworks, common entrance examinations, and umbrella regulatory bodies such as the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI).

The consolidation of bodies like the University Grants Commission and the All India Council for Technical Education under a single framework reflects administrative streamlining but also enhances Union-level oversight. From a federal perspective, this may reduce policy fragmentation but risks marginalizing state-specific priorities. Furthermore, national entrance examinations conducted by central agencies potentially limit states’ flexibility in admission processes. Critics argue that uniformity may undermine regional educational models, especially in states with distinctive socio-political histories. Therefore, NEP 2020 illustrates the tension between cooperative federalism—where center and states



collaborate and centralized governance—where policy direction flows predominantly from the Union government.

Ideological State Apparatus

The concept of the ideological state apparatus (ISA), articulated by Louis Althusser (1971), offers a critical lens for understanding curriculum reform. According to Althusser, institutions such as schools function to reproduce dominant ideologies and legitimize state power by shaping citizens' beliefs, identities, and values.

Education, therefore, is not ideologically neutral. Curriculum choices, historical narratives, and language policies shape national consciousness. NEP 2020's emphasis on Indian knowledge systems, classical languages, and civilizational heritage can be interpreted as part of a broader project of cultural reassertion. Supporters argue that this approach decolonizes education by correcting Eurocentric biases and restoring indigenous epistemologies. Critics, however, caution that curricular reorientation may privilege certain narratives over pluralistic interpretations. The ISA framework underscores that educational reform is a site of ideological negotiation. In contemporary India, debates around history textbooks, language hierarchies, and cultural representation reflect broader political contestations. NEP 2020 must thus be understood not only as administrative modernization but as a rearticulation of national identity within education.

Structural Reforms in School Education

One of the most visible reforms under NEP 2020 is the restructuring of school education from the traditional 10+2 model to a 5+3+3+4 design aligned with cognitive developmental stages. The new structure integrates Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) into formal schooling, acknowledging research that early learning significantly influences long-term academic outcomes. The policy's prioritization of foundational literacy and numeracy responds to alarming evidence from Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys showing that many primary students struggle with basic reading and arithmetic skills. By launching national missions focused on foundational learning, NEP 2020 attempts to address systemic weaknesses at the grassroots level.

Assessment reform constitutes another critical shift. The establishment of PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) seeks to standardize competency-based evaluation, moving away from rote memorization toward conceptual understanding. While this approach aligns with global best practices, it also centralizes benchmarking



processes. Standardization may improve comparability but could reduce local pedagogical flexibility, particularly in culturally diverse states.

Additionally, the policy promotes vocational education integration from middle school onward, aiming to dismantle the historical hierarchy between academic and vocational streams. This reflects recognition of demographic realities and labor market needs in a rapidly changing economy.

Higher Education Governance Transformation

Higher education reform under NEP 2020 is comprehensive and ambitious. The proposal to establish the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) seeks to separate regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard-setting into distinct verticals under one umbrella body. The stated objective is to eliminate overlapping jurisdictions and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

The transition toward multidisciplinary universities marks a significant departure from fragmented institutional models. Standalone colleges are expected to evolve into autonomous degree-granting institutions or merge into university clusters. The introduction of a four-year undergraduate degree with research options aligns Indian higher education with international standards. Multiple entry and exit points, supported by the Academic Bank of Credits, reflect flexibility and lifelong learning principles. However, concerns remain regarding implementation capacity, faculty preparedness, and infrastructural readiness. Centralization of regulatory authority, even alongside institutional autonomy, creates a paradox. While universities may gain curricular flexibility, macro-level governance becomes more centralized. This raises questions about accountability, transparency, and democratic oversight in higher education governance.

Federalism and State Resistance

Educational reform in India has historically encountered resistance from states wary of central encroachment. NEP 2020 has elicited varied responses across regions. The government of Tamil Nadu, under Chief Minister M. K. Stalin, has expressed strong reservations regarding the three-language formula and centralized testing mechanisms. Tamil Nadu's resistance must be understood within its historical anti-Hindi movements and Dravidian political ideology, which emphasizes linguistic and cultural autonomy. Similar concerns have emerged in other non-Hindi-speaking states, illustrating that language and curriculum decisions are deeply political.



Some states perceive the introduction of national entrance tests and common regulatory frameworks as diminishing their authority over admissions and curriculum design. These tensions highlight the practical challenges of implementing nationwide reforms in a politically diverse federation.

Language Politics and Cultural Identity

Language has always been central to India's political evolution. The recommendation that mother tongue or regional language be the medium of instruction until Grade 5 is pedagogically supported by cognitive science research. However, in multilingual societies, language policy is inseparable from identity politics.

The three-language formula revives longstanding debates over Hindi's status as a national link language. For many southern and northeastern states, language policy carries symbolic implications of cultural autonomy. Therefore, while NEP 2020 frames language reform as child-centric and pedagogical, its reception is shaped by historical and political sensitivities.

Privatization and Commercialization

According to AISHE data, a majority of higher education institutions in India are privately managed. NEP 2020 encourages philanthropic models and graded autonomy, but without substantial public investment increases, autonomy may shift financial burdens onto students. Political economy scholars argue that commercialization risks deepening educational inequality. Elite private institutions may flourish, while marginalized communities struggle with affordability. Ensuring equity requires robust scholarship programs and public financing mechanisms.

Digital Transformation and Inequality

NEP 2020's emphasis on digital platforms and the National Educational Technology Forum reflects global digitalization trends. However, UDISE+ data reveal disparities in device access, internet connectivity, and electricity supply in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital divide, demonstrating that online learning disproportionately disadvantages marginalized students. Without infrastructural investment and digital literacy training, technological reforms risk reinforcing structural inequalities.



Ideological Dimensions of Curriculum Reform

The incorporation of Indian knowledge systems and classical traditions reflects an effort to decolonize education. Advocates argue that colonial-era curricula marginalized indigenous epistemologies. Critics, however, caution against homogenizing India's plural heritage into singular narratives. Curriculum reform shapes civic identity, democratic values, and historical consciousness. In diverse societies, maintaining pluralism and inclusivity in curricular content is essential to prevent ideological polarization.

Implementation Challenges

Implementation remains the most critical determinant of NEP 2020's success. Fiscal constraints pose a major obstacle. Achieving 6% GDP expenditure requires sustained political commitment across successive governments.

Teacher training, bureaucratic coordination, regulatory transition, and stakeholder consultation present additional challenges. Political polarization may also affect continuity and consensus-building. Effective implementation requires genuine cooperative federalism and transparent governance mechanisms.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents one of the most ambitious educational reform initiatives in independent India. It seeks to modernize the curriculum, restructure governance, promote flexibility, and position India as a global knowledge leader. However, reform is inherently political. The policy reflects broader trends toward centralized coordination, market-oriented restructuring, and cultural rearticulation. Its long-term success depends on balancing competing imperatives: autonomy and accountability, centralization and federal sensitivity, modernization and social justice, and cultural revival and pluralistic inclusivity. Educational reform in India is not merely technocratic it is a democratic negotiation shaped by political contestation and ideological debate.

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