



# A Critical Theoretical Study of NEP-2020

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## ABSTRACT:

*One significant step in reforming India's educational system is the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). Its main goals are to improve student learning, modernize education, and align it with international standards. Stronger educational facilities, improved teacher preparation, and skill-based learning are highlighted in the policy. Its primary objectives are to address long-term issues, bring equality, quality, and innovation to education, and get students ready for the demands of the twenty-first century. Three perspectives are used in this paper to examine NEP-2020: social justice, human capital theory, and critical pedagogy. It highlights the policy's positive aspects while also pointing out its drawbacks, such as excessive privatization, linguistic barriers, and unequal access to technology. The basic premise is that NEP-2020 has the potential to make significant strides, but it will encounter obstacles if there is insufficient funding, equitable policies, and public participation in decision-making. We conclude with recommendations for educators, legislators, and others to help NEP 2020 succeed and fulfill its objectives.*

**Keywords:** India, critical theory, education policy, and NEP-2020.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The 1986 policy was superseded by India's first education policy of the twenty-first century, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. A committee under the direction of Dr. K. Kasturirangan prepared it. To address the demands of the modern world, NEP 2020 recommends numerous adjustments to technical, college, and school education. Access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability are the five main pillars upon which the policy is based. Additionally, it is connected to the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030. Its primary goal is to make Indian education more comprehensive, adaptable, and multidisciplinary so that each student can grow into a strong, knowledge-based society and a world leader. Education has always been seen as a means for personal growth and a tool for national development. In India, education policies have aimed to balance cultural identity with the country's modern needs. Since independence, three major education policies

have been introduced: the 1968 National Policy on Education, the 1986 policy (revised in 1992), and the latest NEP-2020. Each of these policies reflected the priorities of their time. The 1968 policy prioritized national unity and identity, while the 1986/1992 policy focused on equality and expanding access to education. The NEP-2020 aims to make India more competitive globally, improve digital skills, and enhance overall learning (Tilak, 2020). This policy is particularly significant as it comes at a time of rapid economic, social, and technological changes in India. As the world becomes more interconnected and technology continues to evolve, education is viewed as essential for both national growth and individual opportunities. The policy introduces several major changes, including a shift to a 5+3+3+4 school education model, the inclusion of early childhood care and education, and the use of the mother tongue as the main medium of instruction up to Grade 5. It also restructures higher education for greater flexibility and creates a National Research Foundation. Although the policy outlines an ambitious vision, its implementation will face significant challenges. Some argue that it may widen inequalities in rural and marginalized areas that lack resources and trained teachers (Kingdon, 2020). Others are concerned about the risks of over-reliance on privatization. This paper goes beyond a simple description of NEP-2020. It conducts a critical theoretical analysis by addressing:

- What assumptions does NEP-2020 rest on?
- How do its provisions align with or conflict with critical pedagogy, human capital theory, and social justice frameworks?
- To what extent can NEP-2020 deliver on its transformative promise in practice?

By exploring these questions, the paper contributes to the academic conversation around NEP-2020, moving from a basic summary to a critical examination of its vision and challenges.

## 2. Literature Review:

### 1- Historical Context of Indian Education Policies:

The Kothari Commission (1964–66) laid the foundation for India's first National Policy on Education (1968). The 1968 policy focused on national integration, modernization, and improving quality, but its implementation was limited by resource constraints. The 1986 policy, updated in 1992, broadened the agenda to include equity, female education, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. It also established institutions like the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) to improve teacher training. However, as **Jayaram (2013)** notes, despite its progressive goals, the 1986 policy did not address deep-rooted inequalities in access and quality.

NEP-2020 follows nearly thirty years of economic liberalization and globalization. Scholars argue that whereas earlier policies focused on access and expansion, the new policy emphasizes excellence, flexibility, and global competitiveness (**Varma, 2021**).

### 2- Responses to NEP-2020:

The announcement of NEP-2020 generated widespread debate. Supporters view the policy as forward-thinking and transformative, praising its emphasis on research, multidisciplinary learning, and early childhood care. They believe that higher education's adaptable structure is in line with international best practices (**Gupta & Jain, 2021**). Nonetheless, a number of important issues have been brought up:

- **Equity and Access:** Tilak (2020) cautions that the policy might make students from underprivileged backgrounds more reliant on private schools.
- **Language Policy:** According to Annamalai (2021), it is impractical for multilingual states to require students to use their mother tongue until Grade 5, which could disadvantage them in competitive exams.
- **Digital Divide:** The push for online learning may cause the gap between students in urban and rural areas to grow, according to KPMG (2021).
- **Feasibility of Implementation:** Kingdon (2020) draws attention to the absence of well-defined financial plans for a policy of this magnitude.

### 3. Critical Theoretical Approaches to Education Policy:

Critical theoretical perspectives must be taken into account when analyzing NEP-2020.

- **Critical Pedagogy:** According to Paulo Freire (1970), education should enable students to critically examine and change their surroundings rather than merely perpetuating social injustice.
- Education policies ought to be evaluated according to whether they uphold current social hierarchies or encourage learner autonomy.
- **Human Capital Theory:** According to Gary Becker (1993), spending money on education increases economic growth and productivity.
- This strategy is reflected in many current policies, such as NEP-2020, which links education to economic competitiveness and employability.
- **Social Justice/Capabilities Approach:** Academics such as Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Amartya Sen emphasise that education should support human dignity, equity, and cultural freedom in addition to economic gains.

According to this viewpoint, NEP-2020 ought to be assessed according to its impact on marginalized groups and inclusivity.

### 4. Research Gap:

The majority of NEP-2020 studies that are currently available concentrate on summarizing the policy or analyzing real-world issues like funding and the digital divide. Few studies provide a methodical theoretical critique that combines social justice viewpoints, human capital theory, and critical pedagogy. By placing NEP-2020 within larger educational theories, this paper seeks to close that gap and provide a more thorough understanding of both its potential advantages and disadvantages.

### 5. Theoretical Framework:

Educational policies are not neutral; they reflect underlying philosophical and theoretical assumptions about the purpose of education, the role of the state, and the relationship between learners and society. A critical theoretical analysis of NEP-2020 requires identifying these foundational frameworks. This study employs three primary lenses: the social justice/capabilities approach, human capital theory, and critical pedagogy.

### **5.1 Critical Pedagogy (Paulo Freire)-**

Paulo Freire created critical pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which sees education as a means of emancipation, social change, and empowerment. The "banking model" of education was criticized by Freire. The "banking model" of education, which sees students as merely passive consumers of knowledge, was criticized by Freire. Rather, he promoted dialogical, interactive education that enables students to examine and alter their own realities. A critical pedagogical analysis of NEP-2020 poses the following queries:

- Does it uphold current social hierarchies or does it provide marginalized groups with worthwhile opportunities?
- Is it a profit-driven system that sees students as consumers or as active participants in their education?

The transformative potential of education may be undermined by NEP-2020's emphasis on global competitiveness and privatization, even though it promotes holistic, experiential, and competency-based learning all of which are consistent with Freirean principles.

### **5.2 Human Capital Theory (Gary Becker)-**

Gary Becker's Human Capital Theory (1993) views education as an investment in skills and knowledge that boosts productivity, helping contribute to economic growth. Policies based on this perspective typically stress employability, efficiency, and alignment with labor market needs. NEP-2020 adopts this approach in several ways:

- It focuses on skill development, vocational training, and improved employability.
- It restructures higher education for greater flexibility and global competitiveness.
- It encourages research, innovation, and entrepreneurship as drivers of economic development.

While integrating economic goals is essential in a globalized context, critics argue that too much focus on economic outcomes risks turning education into a commodity, overshadowing its cultural, ethical, and humanistic aspects (Rao, 2020).

### **5.3 Social Justice and the Capabilities Framework (Amartya Sen & Martha Nussbaum)-**

The capabilities framework (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) shifts the focus from solely economic achievements to promoting human dignity, equity, and expanding individual freedoms. This view sees education not just as a means to gain employment but as a way to empower people to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives. This framework brings up crucial questions regarding NEP-2020:

- Does the policy ensure fair access and opportunities for everyone, regardless of caste, social class, gender, or whether they live in rural or urban areas?
- Are marginalized groups adequately empowered to take part in educational reforms?
- Does adopting digital technology enhance access for all, or could it widen the digital gap?

While NEP-2020 aims for inclusivity, achieving true social equity requires enough public investment, strong regulation of private institutions, and targeted support for marginalized communities. Without these measures, its goals may remain unattainable.

## 6. Key Features of NEP-2020:

A thorough analysis begins with outlining these core features and then exploring their broader consequences.

### 6.1 School Education:

#### 6.1.1 Updated Curriculum Framework-

- The traditional 10+2 education system has been replaced by a 5+3+3+4 framework, covering students from ages 3 to 18.
- The framework includes Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), recognizing its essential role in enabling cognitive growth and social development (**Government of India, 2020**).

#### 6.1.2 Foundational Literacy and Numeracy-

- NEP identifies foundational learning (reading, writing, arithmetic) as a national mission.
- By 2025, all children are expected to develop foundational literacy, recognized as the basis for future learning and growth (**Varma, 2021**).

#### 6.1.3 Experiential and Holistic Learning-

- The curriculum will be competency-based, promoting critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.
- Subjects will not be rigidly divided into “curricular” and “extra-curricular.” Arts, sports, and vocational education will be part of mainstream learning.

#### 6.1.4 Language Policy-

- It encourages multilingualism with a “three-language formula.”
- This provision is hotly debated: while it supports cultural roots, it also poses practical challenges in multilingual states (**Annamalai, 2021**).

### 6.2 Higher Education:

#### 6.2.1 Multidisciplinary Universities-

- The goal is to connect arts, sciences, social sciences, and vocational education while ensuring alignment with international standards.

#### 6.2.2 Undergraduate Education Reform-

- It introduces four-year undergraduate degrees with various exit points:
  - i- Certificate after 1 year
  - ii- Diploma after 2 years
  - iii- Bachelor’s degree after 3 years
- This flexible model aims to reduce dropouts and expand lifelong learning opportunities.

### 6.3 Teacher Education and Professional Development-

- By 2030, the minimum qualification for teaching will be a four-year integrated B.Ed. program.
- The focus will be on teacher recruitment, ongoing professional development, and career advancement based on merit.
- Policies aim to elevate the status of teachers as “nation-builders,” but success will depend on the quality of training and working conditions (**Kingdon, 2020**).

#### **6.4 Technology and Digital Education-**

- NEP promotes using digital platforms, online learning, and proposes a National Educational Technology Forum (NETF).
- However, in a country with significant rural-urban divides, reliance on technology risks excluding students without connectivity or devices (**KPMG, 2021**).

#### **6.5 Governance and Regulation-**

- As an umbrella regulator, the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) will have four branches:
  - i- National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC)
  - ii- National Accreditation Council (NAC)
  - iii- Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC)
  - iv- General Education Council (GEC)
- The goal is to overcome fragmentation and ensure better quality.
- However, critics warn that centralization may harm institutional independence (**Tilak, 2020**).

### **7. Critical Analysis:**

NEP-2020 is praised as a progressive reform but faces backlash for its broad scope and possible inequities. A thorough theoretical study should balance its strengths against its challenges and explore their implications using different theoretical perspectives.

#### **7.1 Strengths of NEP-2020:**

##### **7.1.1 Shift from Rote Learning to Competency-Based Education-**

One major achievement of NEP-2020 is its shift from rote memorization to competency-based learning. This emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and hands-on learning aligns with global best practices (**Varma, 2021**). From a Freirean perspective, this shift enables students to stop being passive recipients and start contributing actively.

##### **7.1.2 Prioritize basic literacy and early childhood education-**

The policy recognizes the critical role that the early years play in cognitive and social development by incorporating early childhood care and education (ECCE) into the official system. One good initiative is the National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy. According to research, children who do not learn to read and write at a young age will suffer for the rest of their lives (**Kingdon, 2020**).

### **7.1.3 Multidisciplinary and Flexible Higher Education-**

Global trends toward lifelong learning and mobility are reflected in the introduction of flexible undergraduate degrees, multiple exit options, and the Academic Bank of Credits. By providing them with more opportunities to catch up and advance, these programs seek to assist students who experience educational disruptions.

### **7.1.4 Boost to Research and Innovation-**

India's historical research output gap may be addressed with the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the encouragement of undergraduate programs that are research-focused. This strategy supports the idea that research is essential to economic development and innovation.

### **7.1.5 Integration of Vocational and Digital Education-**

Positive steps that could lessen the stigma associated with vocational education and increase access to high-quality resources include the inclusion of vocational training and the focus on digital learning platforms. These reforms can help close skill gaps and get students ready for the workforce of the future if they are applied inclusively.

## **7.2 Challenges and Critiques:**

### **7.2.1 Equity and Privatization Concerns-**

NEP-2020's significant reliance on private schools is a major problem. According to Tilak (2020), this privatization might exclude students from underprivileged backgrounds if there is insufficient public funding. This could reinforce current educational disparities instead of resolving them.

### **7.2.2 Language Policy and Multilingual Realities-**

Even though using the mother tongue or local language in instruction helps uphold cultural identity, effective implementation poses significant challenges. In multilingual states like Karnataka or Uttar Pradesh, classrooms often contain children who speak different home languages. Additionally, higher education and competitive exams in India continue to be mostly in English, which can disadvantage students taught in regional languages (Annamalai, 2021).

### **7.2.3 Digital Divide-**

The focus on digital universities and online education raises alarms about the digital divide. A 2021 KPMG report estimated that fewer than 25% of rural households in India had stable internet access. Without major investment in digital infrastructure, these reforms may deepen inequalities and favor urban and wealthy students while sidelining rural and low-income learners.

### **7.2.4 Implementation and Funding Gaps-**

While the policy is ambitious, it lacks sufficient funding. It proposes increasing public education spending to 6% of GDP, a goal first suggested by the Kothari Commission (1964–66) that remains unachieved. Without proper financial backing, teacher training, infrastructure improvements, and curriculum changes may stay unfulfilled (Kingdon, 2020).

### **7.2.5 Risk of Over-Commodification of Education-**

From a critical viewpoint, the focus on global competition, entrepreneurship, and employability risks turning education into a commodity. As Rao (2020) points out, there is a risk of reducing education to mere economic utility, disregarding its cultural, ethical, and civic roles.

### **7.3 Theoretical Implications:**

#### **7.3.1 Critical Pedagogy Perspective-**

NEP-2020 makes commendable efforts to foster holistic and learner-centered approaches, moving away from rote learning. **Freire (1970)** emphasizes that genuine empowerment goes beyond changing the curriculum; it requires fundamental changes that break down social hierarchies of class, caste, and privilege. The policy runs the risk of being a superficial reform without true democratization if marginalized groups are not given enough support.

#### **7.3.2 Human Capital Perspective-**

NEP-2020 aligns well with global labor markets in terms of human capital. Its emphasis on research, skills, and vocational training positions India to take advantage of demographic advantages. However, placing too much emphasis on market-oriented objectives may obscure the non-economic components of education, like moral development, cultural heritage, and civic duty.

#### **7.3.3 Social Justice/Capabilities Perspective-**

Although inclusivity is a goal of NEP-2020, practical issues jeopardize this pledge. The digital divide, language barriers, and growing privatization may limit the opportunities available to disadvantaged learners. According to Nussbaum-Sen, in order for the policy to reach its full potential for human development, it must include more robust provisions for justice and cultural freedom.

## **8. Implementation Challenges:**

An education policy's efficacy is contingent upon both its objectives and its implementation. NEP-2020 presents bold reforms, but its success may be constrained by a number of implementation issues.

- Inadequate Funding
- Teacher Preparation and Capacity Building
- Regional and Linguistic Diversity
- Digital Divide and Infrastructure Gaps
- Resistance to Change
- Equity and Inclusion

## **9. Policy Implications and Recommendations:**

This section offers helpful suggestions for transforming NEP-2020's vision into socially just practice based on the theoretical analysis and comparative viewpoints.

### **9.1 Finance and Equity-**

- Give districts that are more disadvantaged (rural areas, gender gaps, SC/ST populations, first-generation learners) more grants per student by using progressive funding formulas.



- Use fee-regulation frameworks and needs-based scholarships connected to learning support to curb cost increases in private aided institutions.

## **9.2 Teacher Education, Workforce, and Professional Learning-**

- By implementing national standards for mentor teacher preparation and practical clinical placements (lab schools, mentored residencies), integrated four-year B.Ed. programs can be expanded.
- Rather than relying solely on years of service, create career advancement pathways (such as Lead Teacher, Master Teacher) based on demonstrated mentoring experience and instructional skills.
- By introducing micro-credentials that lead to advanced certifications and integrating CPD hours into routine tasks like lesson study, peer observation, and collaborative planning, you can encourage in-service professional development.

## **9.3 Curriculum, Assessment, and Languages-**

- Simplify the curriculum by removing content that is repeated across grades and emphasizing critical thinking, problem-solving, and core literacy and numeracy.
- Rethink assessment practices by shifting toward competency portfolios, school-based assignments, and formative assessments, while keeping high-stakes tests primarily for diagnostic purposes.
- Create bridge curricula for easier transitions to English-medium higher education without penalizing students, and develop bilingual+ pathways that incorporate a mother tongue plus English (or Hindi plus English) as dual proficiency goals.

## **9.4 Digital Inclusion and Ed-Tech Governance-**

- Make investments in public digital infrastructure by setting up learning kiosks in outlying areas, offline-capable content, community Wi-Fi, and device-access programs.
- All digital content should adhere to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines, and accessibility certifications should be mandatory.
- Set ed-tech acquisition standards that safeguard privacy, limit data collection, ensure interoperability through open standards, and require independent proof of learning effectiveness.

## **9.5 Higher Education: Quality with Flexibility-**

- Implement the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) with credit equivalence systems featuring clear outcome descriptors and assess credit transferability to identify equity impacts—who benefits and who may be left behind.
- Support four-year undergraduate programs with research through funding for undergraduate research apprenticeships, community problem-solving studios, and industry-academia labs, particularly at state universities.

- Introduce Accreditation 2.0 with continuous improvement cycles, program-level outcomes, and public dashboards showing teaching quality, student support, and placement without sensationalism from league tables.

#### **9.6 Governance and Federalism-**

- Create cooperative federalism compacts through performance agreements between the Center and States that exchange flexible funds for clear inclusion targets and reporting.
- Grant institutions academic autonomy when they meet equity and quality standards, with possible revocation if standards drop.
- Ensure stakeholder input by institutionalizing school management committees, student councils, and teacher councils with deliberative powers, rather than just token involvement.

#### **9.7 Social Justice Guardrails-**

- Focus on targeted capability expansion through scholarships, bridge courses, counseling, remedial support, and transport for girls and marginalized students.
- Conduct annual third-party audits assessing gender, caste, disability, and rural-urban gaps, linking a portion of public funding to measurable progress in closing these gaps.
- Partner with DIETs, NGOs, and Panchayats to support ECCE programs, develop resources in local languages, and offer local internship opportunities, anchoring reforms in the community context and local knowledge.

### **10. Conclusion:**

- NEP-2020 offers a broad, forward-thinking vision that embraces child-centered education, flexible and interdisciplinary higher education, a focus on research, technology integration, and enhanced teacher professionalism. Through the lenses of critical pedagogy, human capital theory, and capabilities/social justice approaches, this analysis reveals significant promise alongside serious risks.
- From a critical pedagogy perspective, NEP's focus on skills and experiential learning is commendable; yet, true democratization requires redistributing voice, resources, and opportunities.
- Its focus on skills, research, and innovation makes sense from the perspective of human capital, but an excessive focus on commodification could obscure the civic, ethical, and cultural objectives of education.
- In order to genuinely increase freedoms for the most disadvantaged, NEP's inclusive rhetoric needs to be backed by adequate funding, regulation, digital access, and language support, according to the capabilities and social justice perspectives.

The global evidence is unmistakable: long-term reform involves improved systems, not more policies, which promote professional trust, equitable funding, cautious stewardship, and ongoing evidence-based learning. India can turn policy ambitions into broad human development if it combines the NEP-2020 vision

with equity-first investment, robust teacher ecosystems, regulated flexibility, and cooperative federalism. Otherwise, a two-tiered educational system that limits opportunities for the majority while providing a wide range of opportunities for a chosen few could be created. The difficulty is not just in the concepts but also in making sure they are implemented in a fair and equal manner.

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