

National Education Policy 2020 and Educational Change in India: Policy, Culture and Implementation

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a major reform initiative aimed at transforming the structure, purpose and outcomes of education in India by linking access, quality, equity and cultural integration within a single policy framework. This paper examines the nature and extent of educational change in India in the post NEP period drawing on secondary data from the Indian Economic Survey 2025-26 and official reports of key ministries including the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in order to analyse trends in public spending, inclusion and implementation. The analysis shows that while there has been a visible expansion in the education system as reflected in increased enrolment, broader access and the extension of welfare schemes this expansion has not been matched by uniform improvements in quality, institutional capacity or we can say learning outcomes. The gap persists. Budgetary trends indicate a gradual increase in public expenditure on education yet allocations remain below the 6% GDP target proposed in NEP 2020 limiting the scale of reform. At the same time efforts to integrate Indian Knowledge Systems, local languages and cultural content into the curriculum signal a shift toward a more context-sensitive model of education, though this integration remains partial and uneven due to constraints related to curriculum development, teacher preparedness, institutional readiness etc. The process is ongoing. After all the findings suggest that educational change in India is real but incomplete shaped by the interaction between policy ambition, economic priorities and institutional realities where progress is evident but uneven across regions and sectors. Change is real. But not complete.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Educational Reform, Public Spending, Indian Knowledge Systems, Implementation Gap, Human Capital, India

Introduction

Education policy in India today begins quite deliberately from an expansive claim one that positions education not simply as schooling but as a central instrument for achieving equity, development and national progress and this framing is most clearly articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 which presents education as foundational for building an inclusive and just society while also enabling economic growth and cultural continuity (Government of India, 2020). This is not accidental. The policy explicitly aligns itself with global commitments such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 which stresses equitable and quality education for all, thereby

situating India's reforms within a broader international development discourse where education is expected to serve social justice with economic productivity (Kumari, 2025; Government of India, 2020). The tone is ambitious. And wide. At the same time scholars have noted that NEP 2020 is not merely an update but a structural shift, which is replacing a decades old framework with one that emphasizes flexibility, multidisciplinary learning and skill integration reflecting the demands of a rapidly changing knowledge economy (Aithal & Aithal, 2020; Singh et al., 2024). This shift becomes more meaningful when placed against the demographic reality of India where a large and growing youth population is entering the education system creating both an opportunity for demographic dividend and a pressure point for institutions that must now absorb, train and equip millions of learners with relevant skills for the future economy (De & Mukherjee, 2025). The scale is overwhelming. And the stakes are high. However, as the discussion moves from policy intent to structural reality, the expansion of the education system becomes a central concern because over the past few decades India has witnessed a significant increase in enrolment, institutional growth and access to schooling yet this expansion has not always translated into improved learning outcomes or employability which leads scholars to question whether quantitative growth alone can produce meaningful transformation (Sujatha, 2002; Xaxa, 2014). The need for structural reform thus emerges not as a theoretical idea but as a practical necessity, since the existing system often characterized by rigid curricula, exam-oriented learning and limited industry linkage has struggled to keep pace with the evolving demands of the economy (Rajpriya, 2025). This is precisely where NEP 2020 attempts intervention proposing a reorganization of the education structure, integration of vocational training and emphasis on experiential learning aiming to bridge the long standing gap between education and employment. Still, the question remains whether such reforms can be implemented effectively across diverse institutional contexts. The Economic Survey strengthens this argument by placing education firmly within the framework of human capital formation suggesting that sustained economic growth in India depends significantly on the quality of education and skill development among its population, and that investments in education yield long term returns in productivity, innovation and employment generation (Government of India, 2026). This perspective is not new but it gains renewed urgency in the current context where global competition, technological change and labour market shifts demand a workforce that is not only educated but also skilled and adaptable (Habermeier, 2007; Laverde et al., 2018). Education, therefore, is increasingly viewed as an economic asset. Yet, this economic framing also introduces a certain tension because while policy documents emphasize holistic development and cultural grounding, the pressures of employability and productivity often push institutions toward a more instrumental approach to education where outcomes are measured in terms of job readiness rather than broader intellectual or social development (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). This tension becomes even more visible when one considers the gap between policy ambition and institutional capacity, a theme that runs across much of the emerging literature on NEP 2020 where scholars highlight issues such as inadequate infrastructure, uneven regional development, shortage of trained teachers and limited financial resources as key challenges to effective implementation (Singh et al., 2024; Rajpriya, 2025). The policy promises transformation. Institutions move slowly. And this mismatch is not merely administrative but structural rooted in historical inequalities and varying state capacities that shape how education is delivered and experienced across the country. Moreover, the integration of new elements such as Indian Knowledge Systems, multilingual education and technology enabled learning requires not only policy directives but also significant changes in teacher training, curriculum design and institutional culture which cannot be achieved overnight (Government of India, 2020; Desale, 2025). The process is gradual. Sometimes uneven. It is within this broader context that the present study identifies its central problem like the gap between the ambitious vision of NEP 2020 and the realities of its implementation within diverse

institutional and socio-economic settings. While the policy outlines a comprehensive framework for educational transformation, the extent to which this framework translates into meaningful change remains uncertain and uneven raising critical questions about the effectiveness of policy driven reform in complex social systems. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to examine the relationship between policy vision and implementation, to analyse the role of education as a driver of human capital and economic growth, and to explore the challenges and constraints that shape the process of educational transformation in contemporary India. From these objectives emerge key research questions like how does NEP 2020 operate in practice across different institutional contexts, what factors contribute to the gap between policy and implementation, and in what ways does the changing role of education as both a social and economic institution influence its outcomes in present day India.

Literature Review

The literature on educational change in India after the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 unfolds across overlapping yet uneven strands as policy vision, economic reasoning, social justice intervention, and cultural repositioning and when these are read together not neatly but with some friction, a more layered understanding begins to emerge. The policy itself, as articulated in, proposes a wide restructuring of the education system through school level reforms such as early childhood care, foundational literacy and flexible curricula alongside higher education transformation focused on multidisciplinary institutions, research expansion and institutional autonomy while simultaneously attempting to integrate cultural elements through the promotion of Indian languages, arts and knowledge traditions (Government of India, 2020). It is ambitious, almost expansive in tone. Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, though writing in a different context, help frame this shift by showing how education systems tend to reproduce dominant cultural norms suggesting that any attempt at reform must also grapple with embedded structures of knowledge and power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the Indian context, thinkers like André Béteille and Virginius Xaxa have long argued that education operates within broader social hierarchies where access and outcomes are shaped by caste, class and region indicating that structural inequalities cannot be addressed through policy design alone (Béteille, 1991; Xaxa, 2014). This tension between reform and structure runs quietly through the literature. When the Economic Survey is brought into the discussion, particularly its treatment of education in relation to human capital, the emphasis shifts toward functionality and outcomes where education is viewed as a driver of productivity, employability and long term economic growth, and where improving access with quality becomes central to national development. The language becomes more economic. Education is expected to produce skills and skills are expected to support growth. This perspective aligns with broader human capital theories which argue that investment in education enhances individual capability and national economic performance yet scholars have also pointed out that the translation of educational expansion into economic benefit is neither automatic nor evenly distributed particularly in contexts marked by social inequality and institutional variation (Tilak, 2002; Sen, 1999). The link exists. But it is uneven. And sometimes fragile. A different layer appears when one turns to social justice oriented literature and government reports especially those from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs which document a wide range of schemes aimed at improving access to education for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other marginalized communities including scholarship programmes, residential schooling, hostels and skill development initiatives. These reports provide detailed administrative data like beneficiary numbers, financial allocations, scheme coverage etc. that demonstrate a clear state commitment to inclusion yet they also reveal, indirectly, the persistence of structural disadvantage because the continued expansion of such schemes suggests that barriers to education remain deeply embedded in social and economic

conditions. Inclusion expands. Inequality persists. Scholars like K. Sujatha have shown that educational participation among marginalized groups is shaped not only by economic constraints but also by cultural distance and institutional mismatch while ethnographic accounts by Verrier Elwin and Nirmal Kumar Bose highlight how indigenous knowledge systems and community practices often exist in tension with formal schooling structures creating a gap between lived experience and institutional expectations (Sujatha, 2002; Elwin, 1964; Bose, 1971). The gap is subtle. But persistent. This brings the discussion toward the cultural dimension which has gained renewed attention with the policy emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) where education is expected not only to transmit standardized knowledge but also to reflect local traditions, languages and epistemologies, an idea that resonates with critiques of the historical divide between indigenous and formal knowledge systems articulated by scholars like Arun Agrawal, who argued that the separation between scientific and indigenous knowledge is often artificial and limiting (Agrawal, 1995). NEP 2020 attempts to bridge this divide by promoting multilingual education and integrating cultural content into curricula yet the literature suggests that such integration is complex requiring not just curricular change but also pedagogical adaptation, teacher training and institutional openness which are not uniformly available across regions (Government of India, 2020; Mohanty, 2009). Language itself becomes a site of struggle. Because, as Ajit Kumar Mohanty has shown, the dominance of certain languages in education can marginalize learners from different linguistic backgrounds affecting both comprehension and participation (Mohanty, 2009). The issue is not only linguistic. It is structural. Recent scholarly contributions including those by Dheeraj Pratap Mitra, further extend this discussion by examining how cultural and religious frameworks shape social hierarchies and everyday practices suggesting that symbolic systems whether in the form of sacred-profane distinctions or broader cultural beliefs continue to influence social organization and access to resource, including education (Mitra, 2025a; Mitra, 2019). These perspectives reinforce the idea that education cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural and social contexts within which it operates, and that policy reforms must engage with these contexts rather than assume a neutral institutional space. Education is never neutral. It carries meanings, values and hierarchies. When these strands are brought together, the literature presents a fragmented yet interconnected picture as policy frameworks emphasize structural reform and cultural integration, economic analyses highlight human capital and productivity, social justice reports focus on access and inclusion and cultural studies reveal deeper layers of meaning and mismatch but these perspectives are rarely integrated into a single analytical framework leading to a situation where each strand explains part of the reality without fully capturing the whole. The connections exist. But they remain loose. And this is where the gap becomes evident because while there is substantial work on education policy, economic outcomes and social inclusion, there is relatively limited research that simultaneously examines how policy, economy, culture and social structure interact in shaping educational experiences and outcomes in contemporary India. Pieces exist. Connection is missing.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study does not rest comfortably within a single tradition because the role of education in contemporary India particularly in the context of NEP 2020 moves across economic priorities, cultural meanings and institutional constraints, and it is in this movement, not in a fixed model that the framework takes shape. It begins with human capital theory which has long argued that education enhances individual productivity and contributes to economic growth, a perspective strongly reflected in recent policy discourse and especially in the Economic Survey where education is framed as a key driver of skill formation, employability and long term national development emphasizing that investment in education yields returns in the form of higher productivity, innovation and economic competitiveness. Education becomes an

economic asset. It is expected to deliver outcomes. Scholars such as Becker (1993) and Sen (1999) have expanded this view by linking education not only to income generation but also to broader capabilities suggesting that the value of education lies in enhancing what individuals are able to do and become, though the translation of educational expansion into economic gain remains uneven particularly in societies marked by structural inequalities (Tilak, 2002). The connection exists. But it is not automatic. Alongside this economic framing NEP 2020 introduces a cultural dimension that complicates the picture because it explicitly calls for the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, local languages, arts and traditional practices into the formal education system, thereby positioning education as a site of cultural transmission and identity formation rather than merely a mechanism for skill acquisition (Government of India, 2020). This is a significant shift. It suggests that knowledge is not neutral. It is rooted in context. The emphasis on multilingual education and culturally relevant pedagogy resonates with earlier critiques of standardized education systems particularly those articulated by scholars like Agrawal (1995) who questioned the rigid divide between indigenous and formal knowledge and Mohanty (2009), who highlighted how language hierarchies in education can create barriers to learning and participation. Culture shapes learning. Quietly but deeply. In this sense, the cultural framework embedded within NEP 2020 challenges the dominance of a purely instrumental view of education arguing instead for a more holistic approach that recognizes the importance of context, tradition and lived experience in shaping educational processes. Yet, when these two orientations like economic and cultural are placed within the realities of policy implementation, a third dimension emerges, one that is less about theory and more about practice, though it has theoretical implications of its own. Policy implementation studies have consistently shown that the effectiveness of any reform depends not only on its design but also on the capacity of institutions to carry it out, and in the Indian context, this capacity varies widely across states, regions and institutional levels leading to uneven outcomes even when policy frameworks are uniform (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Government of India, 2020). The gap is real. It appears in differences in infrastructure, teacher training, administrative efficiency and financial allocation, and it becomes particularly visible when ambitious reforms such as those proposed under NEP 2020 are introduced into systems that are already under strain. The policy speaks broadly. Institutions respond selectively. This creates a situation where the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, for instance, may be conceptually endorsed but practically limited because teachers may lack training, curricula may remain unchanged and assessment systems may continue to prioritize conventional knowledge forms. The shift is partial. And sometimes slow. When these strands are brought together, the framework that emerges is not entirely smooth but it is connected in a way that reflects the complexity of the subject where education can be understood simultaneously as an economic tool, a cultural process, and a policy driven intervention, each dimension influencing the others in ways that are not always predictable. Education supports economic growth by building human capital, yet it also shapes cultural identity and social values through the transmission of knowledge and meaning while policy acts as the mechanism that attempts to align these functions within a structured system, though its success depends on institutional capacity and contextual adaptation. The interaction is uneven. But it matters. This combined perspective allows for a more grounded analysis of NEP 2020, not as a purely economic reform or a purely cultural project but as an attempt to navigate both domains within the constraints of real world implementation where aspirations are high, but outcomes are shaped by multiple, intersecting factors. The connection exists. But it remains incomplete.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design relying entirely on secondary data not because primary data is unimportant but because the focus here is on policy,

trends and institutional processes that are best understood through official documents and established reports. The approach is document driven. Data has been drawn from key sources including the National Education Policy 2020, the Economic Survey, and official reports of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment which together provide a comprehensive view of policy intent, financial allocation and implementation patterns across different sectors of education. These sources are reliable. They also reflect the state’s perspective. The time frame of analysis is limited to the period between 2015 - 2025 allowing for a comparison between pre policy conditions and post NEP developments particularly in terms of budget trends, inclusion measures and structural reforms.

The method of analysis combines content analysis with trend analysis where policy documents are examined for themes such as educational reform, cultural integration and human capital development while statistical data from reports is used to trace changes in expenditure, access and programme implementation over time. The reading is iterative. Themes emerge gradually. Content analysis helps in identifying how education is framed within policy discourse whether as an economic tool, a cultural space or a mechanism of inclusion while trend analysis provides a way to assess whether these framings are supported by actual changes in funding and institutional practice. The two methods overlap. That overlap is useful. It is not perfect. But it holds.

Analysis and Discussion

- **Structure of Education System**

The structure of the education system in India, when seen through policy documents like the National Education Policy 2020 and macro level observations from the Economic Survey, presents a scale that is difficult to fully grasp in abstract terms because the system is not just large but deeply layered stretching across regions, languages and institutional types, and it is within this scale that both its strength and its strain become visible. According to official estimates drawn from government sources, the system includes roughly 14 to 15 lakh schools serves close to 24 crore students, and is supported by over 90 lakh teachersmaking it one of the largest education systems in the world (Government of India, 2020; Government of India, 2026). The numbers are staggering. They do not sit easily on paper. And yet, they are central to understanding why reform in India is not simply about policy change but about managing complexity at a national scale.

Table 1: Structure of Education System (India)

Indicator	Value
Schools	~14–15 lakh
Students	~24 crore
Teachers	~90+ lakh

(Source: Government of India, 2020; 2026)

This scale, while reflecting impressive expansion in access over the years, also introduces a set of challenges that are not always visible in policy discussions because managing such a vast system requires coordination across multiple administrative levels like central, state, and local and involves variations in infrastructure, teacher availability and institutional capacity that differ significantly from one region to another. The system is uneven. And this unevenness matters. The NEP 2020 acknowledges this complexity by proposing structural reforms aimed at improving efficiency, flexibility and quality including changes in school structure, curriculum design and governance frameworks, yet the implementation of these reforms must operate within the constraints of an already stretched system where resources are not evenly distributed and administrative capacity varies widely (Government of India, 2020). Reform enters an existing structure. It does not start fresh. From an economic perspective, the Economic Survey reinforces

the importance of viewing education not just in terms of access but in terms of outcomes particularly learning quality and skill development which are essential for translating educational expansion into economic growth and productivity (Government of India, 2026). However, the sheer size of the system complicates this transition because improving quality across millions of classrooms requires sustained investment, effective monitoring and continuous teacher training, all of which demand both financial and institutional commitment. It is not simple. It takes time. Moreover, disparities between urban and rural areas, as well as across different states, mean that while some parts of the system may adapt quickly to new policies and technologies, others may lag behind creating pockets of progress alongside areas of stagnation. This tension between scale and manageability becomes particularly significant when considering the goals of NEP 2020, which include universal access, improved learning outcomes and the integration of new pedagogical approaches because achieving these goals requires not only policy clarity but also the ability to deliver at scale, something that is inherently challenging in a system of this magnitude. The numbers tell a story. But not the whole story. They show expansion, but they do not capture quality, engagement, or the everyday realities of classrooms where factors such as teacher-student interaction, language of instruction and local context play a critical role in shaping educational outcomes. The system is large. Its challenges are larger. Scale is massive.

- **Budget and Public Spending**

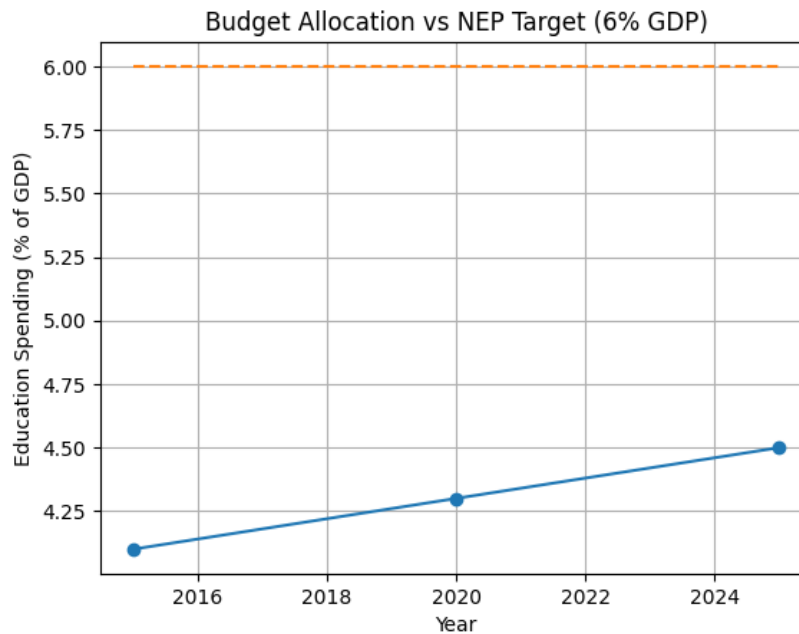
Public spending on education in India, when traced across the last decade and read alongside the Economic Survey and ministry reports reveals a pattern that is steady but not transformative where allocations have increased in nominal terms yet remain below the levels envisioned in policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 which clearly recommends public investment in education to reach 6% of GDP (Government of India, 2020; Government of India, 2026). The movement is gradual. It does not jump. Data drawn from official estimates suggests that education expenditure as a share of GDP has moved from around 4.1% in 2015 to approximately 4.3% in 2020 and further to nearly 4.5% by 2025, indicating a slow upward trend but also a persistent gap between actual spending and policy targets. The gap remains. It does not close easily.

Table 2: Budget Trends in Education (2015-2025)

Year	Education Spending (% of GDP approx)
2015	~4.1%
2020	~4.3%
2025	~4.5%

(Source: Government of India, 2026; Ministry Reports)

Graph 1: Budget Allocation vs NEP Target (6% GDP)



When this trend is placed within the broader policy context, it begins to reflect a tension that is not always stated directly because while NEP 2020 outlines a comprehensive and ambitious agenda ranging from universal access and foundational literacy to higher education reform and integration of Indian Knowledge Systems the financial commitment required to support such wide ranging changes has not expanded at the same pace leading to a situation where policy vision often runs ahead of budgetary capacity. The ambition is clear. The support is partial. Economic Survey discussions reinforce the importance of sustained investment in education, particularly in areas such as skill development, digital infrastructure and teacher training which are essential for improving learning outcomes and aligning education with the needs of a modern economy (Government of India, 2026). Yet, the actual allocation patterns suggest that while education is recognized as important, it competes with other sectors for limited public resources, which affects the scale and speed of reform implementation. Another layer of complexity appears when one considers not just allocation but utilization because several ministry reports indicate that there are often gaps between funds allocated and funds actually spent, reflecting administrative delays, procedural constraints and variations in state level capacity which in turn influence how effectively educational programmes are implemented on the ground. The issue is not only how much is allocated. It is how much is used. This becomes particularly relevant for centrally sponsored schemes such as Samagra Shiksha or scholarship programmes for marginalized groups where underutilization of funds can limit the intended impact even when financial resources are formally available (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2020; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). The flow slows down. Outcomes follow. At the same time, the gradual increase in spending does indicate a continuing commitment to education, especially in the context of expanding enrolment growing institutional networks, and the rising demand for quality education across different levels, but this increase, while necessary, may not be sufficient to meet the structural challenges identified in both policy and research literature including regional disparities, infrastructure gaps and uneven teacher distribution. The system demands more. The allocation responds slowly. This mismatch between demand and investment becomes even more critical when considering the goals of NEP 2020 which require not only incremental funding but sustained and targeted investment across multiple dimensions of the education system. When viewed together, these trends suggest that public spending on education in India is moving in the right direction but at a pace that may not

fully support the scale of transformation envisioned in policy, and this creates a persistent tension between what is planned and what is possible where financial constraints shape the boundaries within which reform can occur. The increase is visible. The limitation is also visible. Ambition is higher than allocation.

- **Inclusion and Social Justice**

The question of inclusion and social justice in education particularly in the context of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes can't be separated from the broader structure of state intervention because access to education for these groups has historically been shaped by exclusion, marginalization and uneven opportunity, and it is through targeted schemes like scholarships, residential schools and welfare programmes etc. that the state attempts to correct these imbalances. The reports of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs when read closely provide not only administrative data but also a narrative of gradual expansion where the reach of schemes such as pre matric and post matric scholarships has increased over time covering a larger number of beneficiaries and reflecting a sustained effort to reduce financial barriers to education . The numbers grow. Access widens. Yet, the deeper story is more complex.

Table 3: Scholarship & Welfare Data (SC/ST) - Indicative Trends

Scheme	Focus	Trend
Pre-Matric Scholarship	School-level support	Increasing coverage
Post-Matric Scholarship	Higher education support	Expanded beneficiaries
EMRS (Eklavya Model Residential Schools)	Tribal residential education	Rapid institutional expansion

(Source: Ministry Reports, 2019-2024)

Pre-matric scholarship schemes, which is aimed at supporting students at the school level play a crucial role in preventing early dropout by addressing basic financial constraints while post-matric scholarships extend this support into higher education where costs become a more significant barrier and where participation rates for marginalized groups have traditionally been lower. These schemes are not merely financial tools. They are entry points. Data from ministry reports indicates that both the allocation of funds and the number of beneficiaries under these schemes have increased over the years suggesting that the state has expanded its commitment to educational inclusion particularly for SC-ST communities . The expansion is visible. It is measurable. At the same time, the development of Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) which are designed to provide quality education in tribal areas through residential facilities, reflects an institutional approach to inclusion where the focus is not only on access but also on creating supportive learning environments that can address geographical and socio-cultural barriers faced by tribal students. The model is promising. It is still evolving. However, while these trends indicate progress, they also reveal the limits of policy intervention because increasing funding and expanding coverage do not automatically translate into equal outcomes and the persistence of inequality suggests that structural factors such as regional disparities, quality of schooling, language barriers and socio-cultural distance between institutions and communities continue to shape educational experiences in ways that policy alone cannot fully address. Inclusion improves. But unevenly. For instance, while more students may be enrolled in schools or colleges due to scholarship support, their retention, performance and transition into meaningful employment remain influenced by factors that lie beyond financial access including institutional quality and social environment. The challenge deepens. Quietly. Moreover, the implementation of these schemes is itself subject to administrative and procedural constraints where delays in fund disbursement, variations in state level execution and gaps in awareness among beneficiaries can limit the effectiveness of otherwise

well designed programmes, a point that emerges indirectly from the detailed reporting of scheme performance in ministry documents. The system responds. But not always smoothly. This creates a situation where policy success must be understood not only in terms of allocation and coverage but also in terms of delivery and impact, which are more difficult to measure and often uneven across regions. When viewed together, the evidence suggests that inclusion in education for SC-ST communities in India has improved through sustained policy efforts reflected in increased funding, expanded scholarship schemes, and institutional innovations like EMRS, yet this progress coexists with persistent inequalities that continue to shape educational outcomes indicating that while access has widened, equity in a deeper sense covering quality, experience and opportunity remains an ongoing challenge. The movement is forward. But not complete. Inclusion improves. Inequality persists.

Indian Knowledge System (IKS)

The idea of integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into the formal education framework, as articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 marks a significant shift in how education is imagined in India because it attempts to move beyond a narrowly standardized often Western oriented model of knowledge toward one that recognizes the value of indigenous traditions, languages, arts and cultural practices positioning them as legitimate and necessary components of learning rather than as peripheral or symbolic additions . This shift is not entirely new in spirit, but it is more explicit and structured in policy than before where the promotion of Indian languages especially as mediums of instruction in early education along with the inclusion of local arts, crafts and cultural narratives, is seen as essential for making education more meaningful and contextually rooted. The intention is clear. Education should feel closer to lived experience. At the same time, this emphasis also reflects a broader concern that education systems, over time, have distanced learners from their own cultural environments creating a gap between formal knowledge and everyday life, a gap that NEP 2020 attempts to address by bringing culture back into the classroom. However, while the policy framework presents this integration as both desirable and necessary, the process of translating this vision into practice reveals a set of challenges that are not always fully acknowledged at the level of policy design because incorporating Indian Knowledge Systems into education requires more than curricular inclusion it demands changes in pedagogy, teacher training, institutional mindset and assessment practices, all of which are deeply embedded within existing structures that may not easily adapt to new forms of knowledge. The shift is conceptual. Implementation is slower. For instance, while the policy encourages the use of regional and local languages in early education, the availability of trained teachers, teaching materials and standardized resources in these languages remains uneven across states creating a situation where the policy goal is widely accepted but unevenly realized. The gap appears quietly. It shows up in classrooms. The inclusion of arts and cultural practices within the curriculum similarly reflects an attempt to broaden the scope of education beyond cognitive learning to include aesthetic and experiential dimensions recognizing that learning is not limited to textbooks but also involves engagement with tradition, creativity and community practices. This is important. It changes the tone of education. Yet, in practice, such elements are often treated as supplementary rather than integral, partly because existing evaluation systems continue to prioritize academic performance in conventional subjects, thereby limiting the space available for alternative forms of knowledge to be fully recognized and valued. The system adjusts slowly. Sometimes reluctantly. This creates a tension between the policy's holistic vision and the operational realities of schooling, where time, resources, and institutional priorities shape what is actually implemented. Another layer of complexity emerges when one considers the diversity of Indian Knowledge Systems themselves which are not uniform but vary widely across regions, communities and traditions, raising questions about representation, selection and standardization within a national curriculum

framework. Whose knowledge is included. And how. These are not simple questions. They involve decisions about cultural legitimacy and educational relevance, and they require careful negotiation to avoid reducing rich and diverse traditions into simplified or tokenistic representations. The risk is subtle. But real. At the same time, the integration of such knowledge systems also intersects with broader debates about modernity and tradition where the challenge lies in balancing the need for globally relevant skills with the desire to preserve and promote local cultural identities, a balance that is not always easy to achieve within a single educational framework. When viewed in this light, the inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems in NEP 2020 can be understood as both a cultural revival effort and a pedagogical reorientation aiming to make education more inclusive, context-sensitive and reflective of India's diverse heritage, yet its impact remains uneven due to variations in institutional capacity, resource availability and implementation strategies across different regions. The intention moves ahead. Practice follows slowly. This unevenness does not negate the importance of the initiative but it does highlight the need for sustained effort, continuous adaptation and context-specific approaches to ensure that cultural integration becomes a meaningful part of education rather than a symbolic addition. The direction is clear. The journey is incomplete. Culture is included. But unevenly.

Implementation Gap

The question of implementation sits at the centre of the current educational reform debate in India, not because policy is weak but because the distance between policy vision and institutional practice remains persistent and this gap becomes particularly visible when the ambitious framework of the National Education Policy 2020 is read alongside the grounded realities reflected in the Economic Survey and various ministry reports. The policy itself outlines a comprehensive transformation covering access, quality, equity and cultural integration while emphasizing systemic change across school and higher education, yet the realization of these goals depends on the capacity of institutions to translate broad directives into everyday practices, a process that is uneven and often slow. The vision is expansive. The system is constrained. The Economic Survey reinforces this tension by highlighting the importance of improving both access and quality while also pointing to the need for better learning outcomes, skill alignment, and efficient use of resources suggesting that despite increased investment and policy attention, outcomes do not always correspond to expectations. This is where the gap begins to show. Because while enrolment levels may rise and institutional expansion may continue, the quality of education, employability of graduates and regional equity in access remain uneven indicating that policy success cannot be measured solely through input indicators such as funding or infrastructure. Outcomes matter more. And they vary. Ministry reports, particularly those from the departments dealing with social justice and tribal affairs provide further insight into this implementation gap by documenting the execution of schemes such as scholarships, residential schooling and welfare programmes where allocations and beneficiary numbers have increased over time, yet the effectiveness of these schemes is often shaped by administrative efficiency, procedural delays and variations in state level governance. Funds are allocated. But not always fully utilized. Schemes are designed. But not always delivered as intended. This creates a situation where the presence of policy does not guarantee its impact and where institutional bottlenecks ranging from delays in fund disbursement to gaps in monitoring and evaluation limit the reach and effectiveness of reform efforts. The system moves. But not smoothly. Another dimension of the implementation gap lies in the complexity of coordination required within India's federal structure where education is a shared responsibility between central and state governments, and where differences in administrative capacity, financial resources and political priorities lead to variations in how policies are adopted and executed across regions. The same policy travels differently. Outcomes diverge. Some states are able to align quickly with new frameworks adopting curricular changes

and improving infrastructure while others struggle with basic implementation, creating a landscape of uneven reform where progress is visible but not uniform. This unevenness matters. It shapes experience. At a more structural level, the gap between policy and practice is also influenced by deeper issues such as teacher preparedness, institutional culture, and the inertia of existing systems which often resist rapid change even when policy mandates it, particularly in areas such as pedagogical reform and the integration of new knowledge systems where change requires not just directives but sustained training, resource development and shifts in mindset. The change is gradual. Sometimes partial. This means that even well designed reforms may take years to fully materialize, and their impact may vary depending on local conditions and institutional readiness. When these elements are considered together, the implementation gap emerges not as a failure of policy but as a reflection of the complexity of transforming a system of such scale and diversity where multiple factors like financial, administrative, cultural and structural interact to shape outcomes in ways that are not always predictable or linear. The intention is strong. The execution is uneven. Fund allocation does not automatically translate into impact, and policy formulation does not guarantee practice, highlighting the need for continuous monitoring, adaptive strategies and context specific solutions to bridge the gap between vision and reality. The gap persists. And it defines the present moment of educational reform in India. Implementation is the real challenge.

- **Education and Economic Transformation**

The relationship between education and economic transformation in India is often presented as direct and almost linear where increased access to education is expected to lead to higher productivity, better employment outcomes and sustained economic growth, and this view is strongly reflected in the Economic Survey which positions education as a central pillar of human capital formation and a key driver of long term development . The logic is clear. Education builds skills. Skills support growth. Over time, this connection has shaped policy thinking leading to increased emphasis on expanding educational access, improving learning outcomes, and aligning curricula with the needs of the labour market particularly in a context where India's demographic profile presents both an opportunity and a challenge, with a large working age population that can contribute to economic expansion if adequately trained and employed. The potential is significant. But it is not automatic. Despite this strong policy emphasis, the translation of educational expansion into economic outcomes remains uneven, and this is where the idea of skill mismatch becomes central because while more individuals are entering the education system and acquiring formal qualifications, the skills they possess do not always align with the demands of the job market leading to a situation where employability remains limited even in the presence of educational attainment. The gap is real. It affects outcomes. The Economic Survey itself points to the importance of improving the quality of education and strengthening skill development systems suggesting that without a closer alignment between education and industry needs, the benefits of human capital investment cannot be fully realized. Education expands. But relevance varies. This mismatch is shaped by multiple factors including outdated curricula, insufficient practical training and limited industry-academia linkages which together create a disconnect between what is taught and what is required in the workplace and this disconnect becomes more pronounced in sectors that demand specialized or technical skills where rapid technological change outpaces the ability of educational institutions to adapt. The system lags. Quietly. At the same time, regional disparities and differences in institutional quality further complicate the picture because students from different backgrounds and regions do not have equal access to high quality education or skill development opportunities which affects their ability to participate in the labour market on equal terms. Opportunity is uneven. Outcomes follow. Another dimension of this issue lies in the broader

structure of the economy where the availability of jobs, the nature of employment and the pace of economic growth also influence how effectively education translates into employment suggesting that the relationship between education and economic transformation is not one directional but shaped by the interaction between educational systems and economic structures. The link exists. But it is conditional. In this context, policy initiatives that focus on skill development, vocational education and industry collaboration become crucial, yet their impact depends on effective implementation and sustained investment, both of which remain uneven across regions and sectors. When viewed together, the evidence suggests that while education in India has expanded significantly and continues to be seen as a key driver of economic transformation, the outcomes of this expansion are shaped by the quality and relevance of education, as well as by broader structural factors within the economy leading to a situation where progress is visible but incomplete, and where the promise of education as a pathway to economic mobility remains only partially fulfilled. The growth is real. The gap persists. Education grows. Outcomes lag.

Conclusion

The analysis of educational change in India in the context of the National Education Policy 2020 ultimately brings forward a picture that is neither entirely optimistic nor entirely critical but something in between like layered, uneven and still unfolding because while the policy itself represents one of the most comprehensive reform efforts in recent decades aiming to restructure the system, improve access and quality, and reconnect education with cultural roots, the outcomes so far suggest that transformation is occurring but not at the pace or depth envisioned in policy documents (Government of India, 2020). The ambition is clear. It stretches across school education, higher education and the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems attempting to address long standing issues of rigidity, fragmentation and cultural disconnect, yet when this ambition is placed alongside budgetary trends, a different picture begins to appear where public spending on education has increased gradually over the past decade but remains below the recommended threshold of 6% of GDP indicating that financial commitment, while present, has not fully matched the scale of reform required. The increase is steady. But limited. This gap between aspiration and allocation becomes even more significant when viewed in relation to implementation where ministry reports and policy assessments point toward uneven execution across regions, delays in fund utilization and variations in institutional capacity, all of which shape how reforms are experienced on the ground. The system responds. But not uniformly. At the same time, the cultural dimension of NEP 2020 particularly the emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems, multilingual education and the inclusion of local traditions reflects an important shift in how education is conceptualized moving beyond a purely instrumental view toward one that acknowledges the role of culture, identity and context in learning, yet the integration of these elements remains partial, often limited by constraints related to curriculum development, teacher preparedness, and institutional inertia suggesting that while the direction is clear, the process of cultural integration is still in its early stages. The idea is strong. The practice is uneven. When these strands policy ambition, budgetary commitment, implementation dynamics and cultural integration are brought together, the conclusion that emerges is not of failure but of incomplete transformation where visible progress coexists with persistent gaps and where the success of reform depends on the ability to bridge these gaps over time. Reform is visible. Transformation is incomplete. Policy is strong. Delivery is uneven. From this analysis, a set of policy implications emerges grounded not in abstract recommendations but in patterns observed across data and reports beginning with the need to increase public spending on education toward the 6% of GDP target outlined in NEP 2020, not merely as a symbolic commitment but as a practical requirement for addressing infrastructure gaps improving teacher training and supporting large scale reforms because without adequate funding, even well designed policies struggle to produce meaningful



outcomes. Investment matters. Equally important is the need to improve fund utilization, ensuring that allocated resources are effectively disbursed and monitored, reducing delays and administrative bottlenecks that currently limit the impact of various schemes, particularly those aimed at marginalized communities. The flow must improve. Strengthening implementation mechanisms is another critical area requiring better coordination between central and state governments, improved institutional capacity and continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure that policy directives translate into practice across diverse contexts. Delivery needs attention. In addition, the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into education calls for sustained investment in teacher training and curriculum development, so that cultural elements are not treated as peripheral but become meaningful components of learning supported by pedagogical clarity and institutional support. Culture needs grounding. Finally, the diversity of India's educational landscape demands a degree of regional flexibility in policy implementation allowing states and institutions to adapt reforms to local conditions while maintaining overall policy coherence, thereby addressing the unevenness that currently characterizes the system. Uniform policy. Flexible practice. These measures, taken together, do not promise immediate transformation but they provide a pathway toward more effective and inclusive educational reform where the gap between policy and practice can gradually be reduced.

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