

Reimagining Indian Education: A Comparative and Sustainable Appraisal of NEP 2020 within India's Policy Evolution Framework

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy, 2020, is a landmark in the Indian educational space that brings forward a more holistic, flexible and sustainable approach, or an artifice to re-define the education relationship concerning society and development. This study contains a qualitative comparative policy analysis of NEP 2020 with the previous education policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992 to review the structural evolution and the alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Document analysis and sustainability mapping were used to establish the ways in which NEP 2020 has brought inclusivity, vocational education, environmental awareness, and digital literacy within one single reformist agenda. Indeed, the findings point out that NEP 2020 lays out the educational vision of India - explicit mention of learning outcomes (in concert with the imperatives of sustainability) in SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). In fact, through a number of innovations such as a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, the addition of the National Research Foundation, and the integration of vocational and environmental education, NEP 2020 provides the framework for an inclusive education towards future readiness. This comparative analysis also determines how NEP 2020 fills gaps in the previous policies to promote teacher empowerment, institutional autonomy and community participation with international collaboration in the SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The study concludes that NEP 2020, if implemented effectively, will serve as a role model for ESD therefore, help India achieve both its national goals as well as 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Comparative Education Policy, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Vocational and Inclusive Learning, Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education.

Introduction

The education system in India is slowly transforming in order to address the promise made by the country to the 17 SDGs by the United Nations [9]. Out of these NEP 2020 has become a tool of high order in the realization of some goals that are interconnected with each other, not only SDG 4 but SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, and even SDG 13 [1,3,5]. Having a comprehensive curriculum, inclusivity, and capacity-building initiatives, NEP 2020 provides the country with the framework that should allow education to have a direct effect on the social, economic, and environmental sustainability[6]. NEP 2020 not just supports sustainability as an environmental concern, but it is a multidimensional concept that informs pedagogy, equity, and life-long learning [7].

It also line-item fits itself under the apprehension of providing equal access to quality education. Most of all the marginal groups. These are environmental awareness and moral education throughout the

educational stages [7]. The presence of a vocational and digital literacy can testify to the policy of the government which connects education to the employability, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development [8]. The Government of India gives the directions to the UGC on implementing NEP through sustainability. NEP 2020 achieves these objectives through experiential learning, value-based education, and through eco-literacy. Therefore NEP 2020 makes education a transformational tool to enhance sustainability not just in the pedagogical aspect, but also in economic, social, and environmental aspects.

Literature Review

The analysis of sixteen scholarly and policy based studies critically offers a multidimensional perspective of how NEP 2020 is in line with pursuit of sustainability, equity, and quality in Indian education.

Aithal and Aithal [2] discuss some new higher education reforms like mix-discipline universities, the National Research Foundation, and digital learning introduced by NEP 2020. They say these changes are changing the way schools are run. They also say the rule creates better education by giving more freedom and clear rules to schools. The main point is that long term empowerment and clear governance requires continuous changes in education.

Modi [4] reviews the NEP 2020 from a structural and administrative perspective. He does point out big changes in higher education, accreditation and multi-lingual teaching. He says the strength of the rule is the decentralized nature of it, and its ability to adapt. Thus, sustainable education systems require flexibility in governance and school autonomy for local innovation. The rule's focus on many languages also furthers SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by making learning more inclusive. Overall, the literature indicates that the NEP 2020 is a continuation as well as a renewal of India's education vision. It combines the lessons of the past with the needs of today in terms of sustainability, fairness and global competitiveness.

Ghosh [5] explains the background of how India's school rules changed after independence which showed that the rules were intended to build democracy and social change. He says that teaching in India has always been about morals and citizenship, which is a reflection of the hopes for equality and justice in society. From his analysis, the NEP 2020 continues that tradition by the use of education to develop people and the country.

Thakur and Kumar [6] compare the education rules in 1968, 1986 and 2020 to demonstrate that teacher shortages, low funding and weak controls have remained issues. Their study points out that the 1968 and 1986 rules were about literacy and access, but the 2020 rule adds flexibility, digital access and sustainability. They view India's policy shift as a step from merely increasing the number of schools to the quality of education.

Mahanta [7] and Pawan [11] explain the difference between the rule of the past and the rule of the present. They find the NEP 2020 uses a new structure of 5+3+3+4 years, focuses on outcomes and start vocational learning early. They conclude that the sustainability in education is found in the combination of inclusion and innovation to equip learners for the challenges in their locality and the world. We see this combination as the basis for lasting learning systems.

Singh and Gunasekaran [8] look at vocational training as a key to lasting development. Their study of the University of Delhi's Skill Enhancement Courses shows the NEP 2020 is a connection between theory and real job skills. The results demonstrate that students are better prepared for careers and entrepreneurship, which confirms that vocational training helps to meet SDG 8 (Decent Work) and SDG 4 (Quality Education).

Bhat and Ashraf [9] and Reshma et al. [10] use surveys to get to know what teachers and students think. They find people see the value of the NEP 2020, but encounter money shortages, poor digital infrastructure, and lack of teacher training. We learn that real sustainability requires policies that can be implemented over time.

Roy [14] gives a philosophical perspective, relating the NEP 2020 with the concept of whole person education introduced in India. She says values, imagination and human growth are important for lasting learning.

Maharaj et al. [15] use ideas from the Bhagavad Gita to explain that the rule's learner-centered model encourages reflection and moral thinking - important for lasting teaching. Together these studies demonstrate that the concept of sustainability is rooted in India's cultural and ethical traditions of teaching.

The papers collectively state that intention alone cannot bring about change teacher empowerment and infrastructure being in place are important for success of NEP. The NEP 2020 is in our opinion a model to achieve many of the SDGs. The literature supports that the NEP 2020 is a strategic move to a lasting education. Its success hinges on fair use of resources, digital access, teacher training and alignment with national and global plans for sustainability. The next section explains the methods used to ascertain the sustainability outcomes of the NEP 2020 based on what we learnt from the literature review.

Methodology

This study adopts an integrative qualitative comparative research design that incorporates document analysis, policy benchmarking, and sustainability mapping to assess the evolution of the Indian education system in view of the NEPs of 1968, 1986, 1992 (modified), and 2020. This methodology is targeted at assessing the historic alignment of the NEP 2020 with previous policy frameworks, as well as alignment with the UN SDGs on quality education, gender equality, and sustainable development.

- **Research Design and Approach**

This study utilizes a simple, qualitative, comparative method looking at documents, comparing policies and mapping sustainability in order to track the changes in India's education system. It focuses on the national education policies (NEPs) of 1968, 1986, 1992 (revised) and 2020. The aim is to see how the 2020 policy fits in with previous ones, and with the UN Sustainable Development Goals related to quality education, gender equality and sustainability. A. Design of Research and Approach The research is exploratory and analytical. It describes the ideas, structure and implementation of NEP 2020. A comparative policy analysis tool is applied to find out what remains the same and what changes. Because the study is qualitative, it is trying to understand and have context rather than numbers.

- **Data Sources Primary Sources**

Official documents of NEP 1968, 1986, 1992 and 2020 by the Ministry of Education. Also, circulars and reports received from the University Grants Commission and 2023 National Curriculum Framework. Secondary sources: 16 peer reviewed academic papers written in 2015 to 2025 on the topic of NEP implementation, comparative education, sustainability in education and policy evaluation. These papers were selected because they present evidence/ideas regarding inclusion, fairness, vocational training, digital change and sustainability.

- **Analytical Framework Comparative Education Policy Analysis**

This is an analysis of the evolving nature of education policies in India by focusing on policy design and reform strategies over the decades. It identifies what are the similarities and what are the differences in the NEPs. This is known as the 'Sustainability Mapping' and links the 2020 policy to the 17 UN SDGs. It illustrates how NEP 2020 tackles the four pillars of sustainability - social inclusion, economic empowerment, environmental responsibility and institutional collaboration.

- **Data Analysis Procedure**

The data was analyzed through policy benchmarking. Each NEP document and associated literature were reviewed for key points such as access and fairness, flexible curriculum, teacher training, vocational courses, governance structure and digital technology. These points were then clustered into four categories of sustainability: social, economic, environmental and institutional. The results were combined to assess the alignment of the education reforms in India with the SDG global framework.

- **Comparative Analysis and Synthesis**

The comparison shows that NEP 1968 was focused on access and national unity; NEP 1986 focused on gender fairness and technology use; NEP 1992 focused on decentralization and accountability; and NEP 2020 is bringing all these together with a broad, interdisciplinary, and sustainability focus. This change is an indicator of India's change from a welfare-based system to a capability-based system. The synthesis was informed by the need to evaluate NEP 2020's innovations against the global sustainability and national priorities.

- **Methodology Rigor & Validity**

We cross-checked information from policy papers, academic studies, and institutional reports to ensure the reliability and validity of the information. Since the study uses only publicly available data, there were no human - subject ethics concerns. Using multiple sources helped to bring depth and authenticity to

our interpretations. The strong qualitative design gives confidence in the evaluation of how NEP 2020 is aligned with sustainability in India and across the world.

Comparative Analysis of Education Policies (1968, 1986, 1992, and 2020)

Policy Year	Core Focus	Challenges Addressed	Innovations Introduced	Benefits under NEP 2020
1968	Universal access and national integration	Inequity in access, lack of compulsory education	Common school system, three-language formula	Foundation for equitable, multilingual education
1986	Equality, women's empowerment, technology integration	Low literacy, gender disparity	Operation Blackboard, distance education	Improved inclusivity and technological expansion
1992	Quality improvement and decentralization	Weak governance, limited teacher training	Autonomy in curriculum, local participation	Enhanced accountability and regional adaptation
2020	Holistic and sustainable education	Digital divide, skill gap, outdated curricula	5+3+3+4 structure, vocational integration, multidisciplinary model	Globally competitive, inclusive, and sustainable education system

Sustainable Development Goals and NEP 2020 Implementation Framework

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)	Corresponding NEP 2020 Strategy	Implementation Method	Expected Outcome
1. No Poverty	Inclusive education and scholarships for marginalized groups	Government funding and digital access initiatives	Reduced educational poverty and inequality
2. Zero Hunger	Midday meals and nutrition-linked learning	Nutritional programs under school education	Improved health and learning outcomes
3. Good Health and Well-being	Physical education and health literacy	Mandatory health curriculum and sports programs	Health-conscious, active student population
4. Quality Education	Universal, inclusive, outcome-based education	Teacher training and curriculum reform	Equitable access and improved learning quality
5. Gender Equality	Women empowerment through education	Scholarships and leadership programs	Equal participation and representation in academia
6. Clean Water and Sanitation	Infrastructure upgrades and hygiene education	School sanitation campaigns	Improved hygiene and public health awareness
7. Affordable and Clean Energy	Energy education and campus sustainability	Renewable energy adoption in institutions	Awareness of energy conservation
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth	Vocational education and skill-building	Internship and apprenticeship integration	Enhanced employability and innovation
9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	Research and innovation ecosystem	National Research Foundation (NRF)	Strengthened research and innovation culture
10. Reduced Inequalities	Equitable access to education	Reservation, digital inclusion, and open schooling	Decreased social and economic disparities
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities	Community-based learning programs	Local governance participation in schools	Educated, responsible urban citizenship

12. Responsible Consumption and Production	Environmental and ethical education	Curriculum integration of sustainability modules	Promotion of responsible behavior
13. Climate Action	Environmental literacy and green education	Climate education in curricula	Climate-aware and proactive students
14. Life Below Water	Marine and environmental studies	University partnerships in marine sciences	Protection and awareness of aquatic ecosystems
15. Life on Land	Biodiversity and conservation education	Ecological and forestry education	Conservation-oriented student community
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Value-based and moral education	Ethics and civic education programs	Culturally and morally conscious citizens
17. Partnerships for the Goals	Global and national collaboration	Academic, industrial, and international partnerships	Enhanced cooperation for educational reform

Result and Discussion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a significant change in the Indian education strategy. It is no longer based on 20th century based rules which largely centered around the idea of getting children into schools. This new system is comprehensive inclusive and is concerned about sustainability. As we have compared, NEP 2020 unites the previous objectives and extends them to the demands of global sustainable development. As the policies mentioned in Table 1 comparison and the sustainability mapping in Table 2 shows NEP 2020 not only consolidates the goals of the previous policies, but also extends their use to the requirements of a global sustainable development.

- **Comparative Education Policy Assessment**

Comparing the NEPs of 1968, 1986, 1992, and 2020, we will be able to observe the gradual shift in the educational priorities. In the 1968 policy, there was an introduction of a common school system and a rule of three languages. It established the groundwork of national unity and provided education to all. The 1986 policy included a consideration of fairness, empowerment of women and application of technology. The 1992 revision shifted its focus to schools decentralization and local control. NEP 2020 unites all these key concepts into a single, flexible, inter-disciplinary strategy, which is responsive to the modern social and economic realities. It has 5+3+3+4 design and it includes the phases of learning, and it incorporates the digital teaching, research, and vocational training. In comparison to previous strategies, NEP 2020 connects education with employment, being a good citizen and environmental steward, and sustainability is an institutional responsibility and a subject of study. This paper indicates that the structure of NEP 2020 promotes greater accountability and inclusion. It has some obvious advantages, including better teacher education, increased vocationalism, and bilingualism. Due to the fact that the policy invites the local and institutional actors to modify the curriculum to suit the needs of the locals, decentralization renders education more accessible and relevant.

- **Alignment of NEP 2020 with Sustainable Development Goals**

NEP 2020 is very appropriate with various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It particularly aligns with SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities that can be demonstrated in the sustainability map. The policy also demonstrates that it is concerned about global environmental issues as it has SDG 13 on climate action via environmental teaching and green campuses. Indicatively NEP 2020 has been instrumental towards SDG 8, by promoting employable skills through the promotion of vocational training which is a fundamental source of sustainable development. It also enables SDG 10 through open access and fairness through digital platforms to eradicate social and regional disparities. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure SDG 9 at the national level are supported by the National Research Foundation and the emphasis on the ecosystem of innovations. The SDG 16 concerning peace, justice and strong institutions and SDG 17 concerning the partnerships are also reflected through the use of value-based lessons and ethics in NEP. As indicated in Table 2 of the sustainability map, the structural transformations of NEP are instruments of implementation of numerous related SDGs rather than single realizations.

- **Interpretation of Results**

The analysis indicates that NEP 2020 is a massive transformation that will transform the vision of education in India to be sustainable, employable, and lifelong learning not a reform per se. It is also shifting to competency based education with emphasis on social responsibility, critical thinking and skills rather than the exam based system of education which is straight line. Also, it is identified that the NEP 2020 addresses the long gap between theory and practice, as it integrates academic research with vocational and business learning, which makes the policies more consistent. This mix addresses the issue of learned unemployment that had remained after previous changes. Education system is being modernised because it emphasizes on research-led innovation, environmental sustainability and digital infrastructure so that education services are able to contribute towards the national growth and global sustainability objectives. Nonetheless, the discussion identifies a number of challenges that can prevent NEP 2020 to achieve its objectives. These are minimal state investment in education (approximately 3 percent of the GDP), disparities in training teachers across the various states, and access to digital access. When there is no consistent investment and coordination of stakeholders and there is a gap of implementation, the transforming potency of NEP can be compromised. The solution to these problems would require continued funding, central and state governments coordination as well as strong monitoring system of education sustainability.

- **Synthesis and Policy Implications**

According to the research of the author, NEP 2020 is intended to provide a great example for India to implement Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India's education policy. NEP 2020 has many areas, but among them are the creation of new curricula, the opening of education for everyone, the care of the environment, and allowing schools freedom. These features can help other developing countries to grow their education systems and make them sustainable. Learning in the kitchen backward from the kids (1 on 1 classrooms): Tuition the virus is an upgraded virus, perhaps with a 99.5% mortality rate. Using Backward from Kids learning teaching tips, tricks and data. Training our Teachers How to use Hands-On, Cross-Disciplinary Learning. Give people cheap digital tools and content in their local language to enable all communities to participate in online learning. To bring closer to matching education to jobs, public policymakers should add more vocational and skill courses after high school. And so set clear rules for sustainability when judging schools on social and environmental performance. Working with the private sector and international partners to keep research, innovation and policies on track.

Summary of Findings

This study has found that NEP 2020 connects India's long standing education policies with the worldwide movement for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It provides a comprehensive plan for making sustainability more than just words but in terms of action and policies. The data points to the fact that if India gets NEP 2020 right and invests the necessary resources, India is capable of creating an education system that is equitable, future ready and environment friendly.

Conclusion and Recommendation

According to the author's research, NEP 2020 would like to provide India with a good way to implement Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the country's education policy. The NEP 2020 has many areas: improve the curriculum, include everyone in society, take good care of the environment, and give more freedom to schools. It can serve as a good example for other developing countries that wish to grow through educating populations and at the same time meeting sustainability needs. For NEP 2020 to be successful in the policy context, it must:

- As a solution to the problem: - Give teachers more skills and encourage them to use hands on and mixed methods of learning.
- For all people to participate in online learning, governments should offer affordable digital tools and local language content.
- As the nation continues to confront the adverse effects of globalization on young people, it is important that countries make the education sector more relevant to the needs of the job market.
- The government says it should be added that: - Add clear rules about sustainability so schools can be judged on how they affect society and the environment.

The Global Compact's Global Action Plan said: "To ensure that the research, innovation and policies continue, we must all build partnerships between governments, businesses and the rest of the world."

Summary of Findings

The primary possibility of this study is that NEP 2020 in relation to the world's promises about SDGs) interlinks India's old plans for education. NEP 2020 provides a framework to transform these goals into tangible outcomes and policies to contribute to sustainable development. The data indicates India is capable of having fair, future-ready, global sustainable education system with NEP 2020 with put into practice in full and having resources enough.

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