Pertanika J. Soc. Sci. & Hum. 31 (2): 747 - 763 (2023)

PERTANIKA JOURNALS

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Journal homepage: http://www.pertanika.upm.edu.my/

Case Study

Can There be a Paradigm Shift in the Indian Education System? An Analysis of Socio-Economic Challenges in Implementing National Education Policy 2020

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ABSTRACT

The government of India has initiated an ambitious reform of the education system in the country with the National Education Policy 2020. This marks the third education policy post-independence, aimed at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. The latest policy promises a revamp of the Indian education structure by formalizing pre-primary schooling, promoting multidisciplinary learning, academic freedom, and creating a more comprehensive, liberal, choice-friendly, and job-oriented education system that aligns with global standards. This paper briefly examines the major changes proposed in the policy for primary education and assesses the extent to which the Indian education system can adapt to fulfil the policy recommendations, given the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the country. This study highlights the hindrances to implementing the National Education Policy 2020 in India, including socio-economic challenges, health and digital access issues. It emphasizes the need for political will, investment in infrastructure and teacher capacity building, collaborative efforts, and careful consideration of potential risks to ensure the policy's success and avoid harm to future generations and society.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Indian education system, National Education Policy, pre-primary schooling, socioeconomic challenges

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received: 12 October 2021
Accepted: 30 September 2022
Published: 02 June 2023

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.31.2.14

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INTRODUCTION

> "The state shall endeavour to provide… free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years."
>
> —Article 45 of the Constitution of India

ISSN: 0128-7702
e-ISSN: 2231-8534

In line with the aforementioned directive principle of the Indian Constitution, the Government of India enacted the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009, making education a fundamental right under Article 21A. This act ensured free and compulsory education to all children aged 6-14 years. The United Nations (UN) also recognizes education as a universal human right, as stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads: "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory." To address India's challenges, requirements, and opportunities in the 21st century, the Government of India introduced an ambitious National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020. The NEP aligns with the spirit of the UN's declaration of human rights and Sustainable Development Goal 4, aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. Education is crucial for any government, as it is fundamental to achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development.

Providing universal access to high-quality education is a crucial factor in the economic development and equitable social order of any nation. However, despite a well-designed policy, several on-the-ground challenges may hinder achieving its aims. One of the significant reasons for such hurdles is the diversity in children's socio-economic backgrounds. These factors impact not only the children's early years of schooling but also their long-term career outcomes (Alam, 2021, 2022; Alam & Forhad, 2022). Thus, it becomes imperative to assess educational policy through the socio-economic lens of the country.

The recently launched National Education Policy 2020 proposes a structural overhaul at every level of education, including primary, secondary, and higher-secondary schooling. However, this paper focuses solely on primary education, as these early years of schooling are crucial for preparing a child for lifelong learning. While the policy introduces some new and ambitious structural changes, it also reiterates some suggestions from earlier policy documents. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the reasons and possible solutions for the decade-old challenges in implementation. This paper examines the major changes proposed by the policy related to primary education and delves deeper into the challenges of implementing it in Indian society, considering the prevailing socio-economic scenario. The first section analyses three major changes proposed by the policy, along with some key caveats related to the recommendations. The following section highlights the significant challenges in implementation from the legal, social, economic, health, and nutritional perspectives. Finally, the paper presents some possible suggestions for implementation.

MAJOR CHANGES PROPOSED IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

One of the significant changes proposed by the NEP for school education is the inclusion of preschool (ECCE) in formal schooling by transforming the existing 10+2 structure to 5+3+3+4. This change means that formal schooling will now cover children from the age of 3 to 18 instead of 6 to 14. The focus will be on helping children equip themselves with 21st-century skills, such as learning new subjects like coding, multiple languages, and greater flexibility in choosing subjects. Apart from the structural changes, the policy also aims for the holistic development of children by proposing the inclusion of co-curricular and extracurricular activities in the regular school curriculum. To promote experiential learning through community activities and involvement, the curriculum content will be reduced. Additionally, the policy takes into account the psychological pressure of board exams and proposes to transform the current assessment system to make evaluations more student-friendly.

Inclusion of Pre-Primary

The most important and discussed change in the National Education Policy 2020 is the inclusion of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in formal schooling. Pre-primary education, covering children between 3-6 years old, will now be a part of formal schooling, recognizing the paramount importance of the initial childhood years in cognitive development. Research suggests that almost 90% of the brain develops before the age of six, making this phase critical for cognitive, motor, linguistic, and socio-emotional development, which lays the foundation for acquiring more complex abilities later in life (Brown & Jernigan, 2012). Therefore, a strong focus on ECCE is crucial for children to reach their full potential and become knowledgeable citizens, which are prerequisites for any country's development. Investing in early childhood programs has also been found to be more cost-effective and impactful than targeting the older age group, improving both educational and socio-emotional aspects (Garcia et al., 2016).

NEP-2020 proposes that ECCE will focus on flexible activity-based learning to develop children's inquiry spirit through counting, colours, shapes, and puzzles. Teaching and learning will involve indoor and outdoor play, cantering on developing cognitive and motor abilities in young children. Activities such as painting, drawing, craft, drama, and music will be introduced to promote cognitive and motor development. The policy also aims to lay the foundation for developing social capacities by proposing activities cantered around sensitivity, cleanliness, good behaviour, and cooperation. The overall aim of ECCE is to develop socio-emotional-ethical abilities along with basic numerical and language skills for well-balanced cognitive and motor development. This program will act as an initiation for children, preparing them for Grade 1 in the formal schooling process.

The NEP proposes that the National Council of Educational Research and

Training (NCERT) will develop a 'National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE),' which will serve as a guideline for parents and early childhood education institutions. The policy suggests implementing this program in a phased manner through various *Anganwadi* centres (a kind of rural childcare centres), established as part of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), for universal access to ECCE. *Anganwadi* workers will be trained accordingly, and basic infrastructure will be provided to the centres. The current structure and capacity building of *Anganwadi* workers will be strengthened. The responsibility for planning and implementing this program will lie with the Ministry of Education, with collaborative efforts between various ministries at the Centre and States, including Education, Health and Family Welfare, Women and Child Development, and Tribal Affairs.

Key Caveats Related to Pre-Primary Inclusion. The overarching goal of providing high-quality ECCE across the country is a very ambitious and welcoming move. However, challenges lie with implementation, as with any policy that looks good on paper. ECCE is proposed to be implemented with the help of the existing structure of ICDS and *Anganwadi* workers. While the ICDS program currently includes pre-primary education for children aged 3-6, its primary focus has been on providing supplementary nutrition given the socio-economic conditions of the children attending its centres. The state's intervention during early childhood was initiated through ICDS, a flagship program of the Government of India launched in 1975, focusing on children's health, nutrition, and education. However, despite being the world's largest early childhood program, ICDS only covers less than half of the children in the age group. According to the 2011 census, there are nearly 158 million children aged 0-6 years, of which nearly 75 million are aged 3-6 years. However, according to the Government of India's official data for the year 2019-2020, there were only nearly 25 million children enrolled in *Anganwadi* centres for ECCE.

One major reason for the low number of children enrolled in ECCE programs is that the ICDS program mainly focuses on supplementary nutrition and children's health, not their education. Furthermore, Anganwadi workers, the program's frontliners, are not well-trained in early childhood education. According to the Government of India (2017), they receive only five days of training and are expected to prepare children for formal schooling. Due to the abysmal failure of ICDS centres in this respect, nursery schools have mushroomed, mainly in the private sector, catering to pre-primary children. However, due to a lack of formal standard operating procedures and guidelines, the result is not conducive and sometimes even disruptive to the spirit of ECCE. The NEP proposes to change this by formalizing pre-primary education with common curricula and quality checks, intending to provide a seamless educational

experience for children from age three onwards. However, some educationalists fear that without proper implementation strategies, this program will only serve as preparation centres for small children for further formal schooling ahead. Majumdar et al. (2021) observe that existing pre-primary centres mainly focus on formal instruction for literacy and numerical abilities, neglecting the development of various cognitive abilities. They argue that preschool should be about cultivating and valuing diverse cognitive abilities and multiple intelligence, which is neglected in the current private or public ECCE centres.

Another concern is related to the main facilitators of this program, i.e., *Anganwadis*. There is an urgent need to substantially increase the financial and administrative attention given to *Anganwadis* for ECCE. *Anganwadi* workers are not regular government employees and receive an honorarium instead of a salary. They are not equipped with the necessary training for ECCE and are often involved in non-ICDS duties such as maintaining registers or conducting surveys. The NEP proposes to provide six months to one year of training and certification to these workers, but it is doubtful how a six-month trained person will be able to cultivate young minds with proper care and attention when the aim is to make pre-primary education as formal as the existing primary education.

Multilingualism and the Medium of Instruction

The NEP proposes educating children in their mother tongue at least up to the primary level (until grade 5) and preferably until the middle level (grades 5-8), and offering India's native classical languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit, as well as some foreign languages, at the secondary level (grades 9-12). This proposal has been maintained in almost all educational policies in India and has been validated through various studies and by educationists worldwide. Numerous studies show that children grasp initial learning more quickly in their home language/mother tongue. Benson (2005) notes that when children are exposed to content delivered in their mother tongue/home language, they can learn new concepts quickly because teachers and students can interact naturally and negotiate meanings together, creating a learning environment that is conducive to cognitive and linguistic development. Hence, it is commendable that NEP encourages a bilingual approach that includes both content and instruction, meaning that textbooks as well as instruction should be in the mother tongue/home language. NEP-2020 also emphasizes that "a language does not need to be the medium of instruction for it to be taught and learned well." It has also been claimed that training in basic literacy and communicative skills in the home language (L1) is useful in learning a second language (L2) because some of the basic concepts and skills learned in L1 can be accessed and used while learning L2 (Lanauze & Snow, 1989).

Before India was colonized by Britain, most educational activities were conducted in native Indian languages. However, Lord

Macaulay, a British governor of India, introduced English to the Indian education system and argued that it was important to do away with Persian and Sanskrit. He believed that English was necessary for the "intellectual improvement" of Indians (National Archives of India, 1965). Since then, Indians have associated their knowledge of English with intelligence. English was used to dominate over the native population and culture by declaring native practices as roadblocks to the development of the country. Indians became obsessed with English, leading to a correlation between knowledge of the language and intelligence. Even now, English-medium schools are preferred over schools that use the mother tongue due to growing demand in the job market (Sreekanth, 2021). However, academics advocate for teaching children in their mother tongue early in school. It is observed that children do not develop adequate cognitive skills when the medium of instruction is not their first language (mother tongue). For instance, Filipović (2018) points out that people think in their first language even when they use a second language. They may not be able to grasp a concept adequately or engage in rich inferential thinking when they learn it in a language that they need to learn. This problem is particularly serious for first-generation learners who are not initially exposed to English at home. It leads to rote learning and mere memorization of concepts instead of understanding them.

Therefore, many educationists advocate that children's initial education should be conducted in their mother tongue. According to Benson (2005), using a familiar language to teach beginning literacy "facilitates understanding sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence." She claims that students learn to read most efficiently when they know the language. Therefore, from the very beginning, children begin to discover the meaning in what they are reading, unlike in L2, where they merely read and memorize. Initial instruction in an alien language generally hinders children from developing higher-order thinking skills as they do not naturally participate actively in the learning process. In a similar study by Cummins (1992), it was observed that it becomes much easier to learn a new language after acquiring foundational literacy and communication skills in the mother tongue. Hence, it would be wiser to use the mother tongue for early grades and then introduce L2 after a few years.

In light of the previous discussion, NEP-2020 proposes using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction until at least Grade 5. Along with this provision, the NEP also envisages implementing the three-language formula, initially introduced by NEP 1968, to promote multilingualism and national unity. NEP states that there will be greater flexibility in the three-language formula, and no language will be imposed on any state, as 'Education' is a subject on the concurrent list. These three languages will be the choice of state governments, regions, and students, as long as at least two languages are native to India. To implement this vision, NEP invites efforts from central and state

governments to invest heavily in developing bilingual learning content and recruiting language teachers. It emphasizes the use of technology and projects/activities to make learning more interactive and enjoyable for children. It also raises concerns about promoting classical languages of India, such as Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Pali, Persian, and Prakrit. Besides classical Indian languages, the NEP proposes to offer various foreign languages such as Korean, Russian, French, Thai, German, and Spanish at the secondary level to meet students' global interests and aspirations.

Key Caveats Related to Multilingualism. Although the whole idea of multilingualism and initial instructions in the mother tongue seems promising for developing foundational literacy skills and enhancing children's cognitive skills, the real challenge lies in its implementation due to the vast linguistic diversity in Indian society. Language plays a crucial role in India's national integration. There are 121 recognized native Indian languages, and 22 of them are included in the eighth schedule of the Constitution (Government of India, 2022). Even though Hindi has the largest population of speakers (48%), English continues to be the official language and a medium of communication across the country. If colonialism brought English and made it the common language of communication, it would continue its role even after seventy years of independence. This can be partially explained by the fact that English promises global integration and upward social mobility. It also became the primary nationwide spoken language because it helped ease inter-state migrations, as there are English medium schools in every state. However, education in India is a subject on the concurrent list, which means both central and state governments have an equal stake in implementing any policy. Many states in India follow only a two-language system in public schools, and English is still the main medium of instruction in private schools. Furthermore, many non-English-speaking states in India have started setting up English-medium schools (Jain, 2017). For instance, the Andhra Pradesh Government (Telugu-speaking state) recently made English compulsory for all government schools. Therefore, until English remains the most sought-after language, schools, parents, and teachers will continue to use English as the primary medium of instruction.

However, there are also those who view mother-tongue-based schools as problematic (D'souza, 2022; Shepherd, 2020; Vij, 2020). For instance, Shepherd (2020) observes that prioritizing native languages over English may deepen the class divide in Indian society. He analyses that before Macaulay introduced English, most educational institutions used Sanskrit and Persian as the medium of instruction. These institutions were reserved for *dwijas* (mainly *Brahmins*) and wealthy Muslims, while *shudras*, *dalits*, and *adivasis* (tribal communities) in India were not allowed to have school education. Furthermore, he observes that after the introduction of English-medium institutions,

dwija Hindus were the first to receive English education and become officials and clerks in the British government. He argues that English has been the language of the ruling class for ages and that it allows *dalits* and marginalized classes to rise and stand equally with the higher classes. Since English is an accepted global language, most of the new scientific knowledge is produced in English. Therefore, he contends that unless all children can read and write in one national and international language, i.e., English, creating a national and advanced intellectual discourse will not be possible.

NEP recommends mother tongue as the medium of instruction for public and private schools, but it is binding on public schools only, which means children from affluent families will continue to be educated in the English medium. The growing trend in the country is that most wealthy parents send their children to English medium private schools along with tuition and/or coaching, while poor children only have the option of public schools. If public schooling gives much more importance to the native language, poor children will never be able to compete with those from privileged backgrounds who receive an excellent education in private schools and are schooled in English from their homes. The experience of the State of Kerala is interesting in this regard. Ameerudheen (2018) reports that many public schools in Kerala were on the verge of closure due to a lack of students, but there was a turnaround in their fortunes when they started offering English medium education. Further, logistical difficulties that arise from inter-state migration need to be considered. Having a native language as the medium of instruction might be problematic for children whose parents frequently shift to different states. That is why government employees who often get transferred to different language-speaking areas send their children to English medium schools so their studies will not be affected.

Given the aforementioned concerns, it is important for the central and state governments to make a full commitment to proper planning. If children begin learning in their home language, it can be highly beneficial for their cognitive, literary, and intellectual development. However, it is equally crucial to ensure that children become proficient in English from an early age to ease their transition to an English medium of instruction in higher classes. Hence, sufficient attention must be paid to ensure that children become early bilinguals so that their proficiency in a second language is not compromised.

Curricular Integration of Academics and Non-Academic Skills

NEP proposes to eliminate sharp divisions among 'curricular', 'extracurricular', or 'co-curricular' subjects and remove the strict boundaries among different streams of secondary education, such as arts, sciences, and commerce. Students will be able to choose a variety of subjects across any discipline based on their interests and needs. The policy also advocates adding crafts and vocational skills to the regular school curriculum. Such a multidisciplinary

approach will promote the all-round development of children and contribute to the country's economic growth. However, this transformation can only be successful if higher education institutions follow suit. For example, if prestigious institutions like IITs or NITs continue to focus solely on scientific domains, students will choose science subjects by default during secondary school. Additionally, despite English and Hindi being compulsory subjects in twelfth grade, students tend to focus on physics, chemistry, and maths/biology because they know that it will pay off in entrance examinations. Therefore, unless the admission process to universities and higher education institutions is reformed, languages and soft skills may continue to be neglected. NEP also acknowledges that the single-stream system sometimes creates hierarchies among various streams, with science streams viewed as superior to commerce or arts.

NEP proposes to offer multiple non-academic subjects such as physical education, ethics, and the constitution at all class levels, as well as a wide variety of vocational courses and choices of arts and crafts at the secondary level. The curriculum will be tailored according to the interests of the children and the requirements of the localities. NEP aims to develop 'fun courses' during the middle level (grades 6-8) that provide hands-on experiences in various vocational skills such as gardening, pottery making, carpentry, and electrical work. This will consist of a 10-day bag-less period where students will intern with local experts in a particular vocational skill. Similar vocational skill internship opportunities will also be available to secondary-level students (grades 9-12). NCERT will design these practice-based curricula and content. NEP emphasizes learning these vocational skills to become successful, innovative, and productive human beings, acknowledging the requirements and demands of the 21st century by including contemporary subjects in the curriculum, such as Artificial Intelligence, Design Thinking, Coding, Holistic Health, Organic Living, Environmental Education, and Global Citizenship Education.

Key Caveats Related to Curricular Integration. Providing a vast array of options for academic and non-academic subjects and flexibility in choosing different streams/subjects/skills is a positive and welcome move. Breaking the rigid streams of arts, science, and commerce will undoubtedly assist in the holistic and all-around development of students' knowledge and personalities. Offering vocational training at the school level may be beneficial for economic contribution to society. However, a genuine concern is that it may increase child labour and dropouts. Students will be allowed to intern at local businesses and with local entrepreneurs, raising safety issues, particularly for girls. Economically weaker children may opt for employment after vocational training and never continue their formal education. This could deepen caste and economic-based inequalities in Indian society as wealthy

families typically prioritize higher education level exams/jobs such as IITs, IIMs, Medical or IAS, and not vocational training. Most school dropouts occur because students have to support their families financially, so providing skill-based training during middle grades might lead to a situation where they do not continue with secondary school. Some experts suggest that imparting vocational education may allow children to drop out of formal school at various levels (Gudavarthy, 2020), leading to reproducing and strengthening existing social hierarchies and opportunity structures. However, NEP assures that vocational training will increase the dignity of labour, but it might reinforce caste-based occupations and strengthen the pyramid-like social structure.

Removing the rigid boundaries between arts, science, and commerce will not be very useful unless changes are made to the entrance examinations after secondary school. For example, the IITs entrance exam only includes Physics, Chemistry, and Maths. If this is still the case, most students who aspire to get into these prestigious institutions will only choose the relevant subjects, and the vision of holistic development might not be fulfilled. Additionally, the proliferation of coaching institutes for entrance examinations will continue to flourish, with wealthy children having an advantage over poorer ones.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Legal Challenges

NEP 2020 proposes expanding the universalisation of education from pre-primary to secondary grades, which includes children between ages 3 to 18. However, it is silent on amending the Right to Education (RTE) Act, which only provides free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14. This vision cannot be achieved without extending the RTE Act's boundary to include children from 3-18 years. The lack of these changes being made a legal right makes it difficult to achieve universalisation, particularly for girls and dropped-out children. It should be noted that the initial draft of NEP 2020 suggested an extension of the Act to cover children from 3-18 years, but this was not included in the final version. According to an NDTV article on July 30, 2020, the final version of the policy proposes universalisation of school education for 3-18 years, but it is not a legal right. Due to the lack of legal support, it will not be mandatory for central or state governments to implement it. Significant numbers of girls drop out of school after elementary school, especially during secondary school. Therefore, without binding the government to provide secondary education, it will be challenging to achieve complete universalisation of education.

NEP also proposes changing the current system of evaluation from a marks-based assessment to testing of conceptual understanding. To achieve this, NEP proposes the formation of a national-level assessment centre called PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development). The goal is to

remove annual exams and have board exams in grades 3, 5, and 8, in addition to the existing board exams in grades 10 and 12. However, some experts, such as Rampal (2020), argue that this new structure violates the RTE Act, which bans children from being subjected to any board exams until grade 8. Additionally, policymakers have acknowledged that various state laws may hinder the implementation of NEP, and without a new legal framework, NEP cannot be implemented in its true spirit ("Change State Education Laws before Applying NEP: Delhi Minister," 2022). Education in India is a concurrent subject, and different states have laws for imparting education in their respective states. Therefore, an inclusive and integrated educational scenario envisaged by NEP cannot be achieved until amending age-long state rules and creating a new legal framework for the pan-India level.

Social, Economic, and Aspirational Challenges

Implementing the NEP policy will be challenging due to India's significant socio-economic disparities. Educational institutions have a crucial role in reducing social differences and discrimination among students and promoting equality (M. S. Roy, 2020). However, the NEP is largely silent on addressing issues related to caste and socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). Although it does acknowledge that learning about caste and Adivasi conditions, as well as the history of discrimination and violence, is necessary to understand affirmative action. The caste or gender-based divide is a significant social problem in Indian society, and there are concerns that the emphasis on digital education after the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate segregation and inequality.

Many people in India lack access to smartphones and proper internet, which particularly affects economically weaker and rural children. According to the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), only 63.7% of children enrolled in public schools have a smartphone at home, compared to 79% of children enrolled in private schools (Pratham Education Foundation, 2021). Moreover, smartphone access to children is limited as in many families, only one smartphone is available and multiple people use it. In addition, access to laptop/desktop computers is also very limited. NEP proposes to teach coding from Grade 6, but very few public schools have computers and internet facilities for students. For instance, only 10% of public schools have internet connectivity, compared to 30% of private schools (Choudhury et al., 2022). Children from economically weaker sections will suffer more, while children from higher income groups or metro cities will have an edge because they can use the well-maintained computer labs in schools as well as personal computers at home. A simple PC generally costs at least twenty thousand rupees, which poor children may be unable to afford. In addition, there is a shortage of qualified and trained public school teachers who can transform their

traditional instruction medium to digital (S. Roy, 2022). Over-reliance on e-learning could deepen the digital divide and worsen existing inequalities in society.

Implementing this policy will be challenging as there are aspirational issues to consider. Madhav Chavan, co-founder of *Pratham*, an educational NGO working for underprivileged children, notes a demand-supply gap for education in native languages. He argues that there is a difference between 'parental demand' and 'government thinking' (Choudhary, 2017), as recent Annual Status of Education Reports (ASERs) have shown a surge in enrollment, especially in English-medium private schools. However, most private schools do not provide quality education and many teachers are not well qualified or trained. Such schools do not follow proper learning-teaching pedagogies, resulting in cramming and rote learning. Despite these drawbacks, private schools offering an English medium are preferred over government schools because English is seen as a means of upward mobility and sometimes as a status symbol. Parents are proud when their children can speak English fluently (Cheruvalath, 2015). In most rural areas, English is generally considered the language of the elites, and demand for it is growing exponentially. NEP advocates for providing primary education in a non-English language, but parents and society may not embrace it wholeheartedly. For example, the Andhra Pradesh government decided to provide schooling in the English medium to cater to the aspirations of parents and students. If there is a demand for the English language in society, then the problem will not be solved by changing things only on the supply side.

This policy proposes three language formulas by introducing classical languages in schools. However, the experience shows that some north Indian states may not teach south Indian languages, and some south Indian states may be reluctant to teach Hindi. Furthermore, it is often argued that even research scholars may find it difficult to decipher the codes of certain classical languages such as *Pali* and *Prakrit*. Hence, including such languages may not be feasible.

Health and Nutrition Challenges

The new education policy aims to provide formal education to all children starting from the age of three. To implement this, NEP calls for joint action by educational institutions and ICDS. However, the ICDS program primarily focuses on children's health and nutritional support. According to a study conducted by Assocham, nearly 40% of Indian children are undernourished, making India home to the largest number of malnourished children in the world ("India has the largest number of malnourished children in the world: Report," 2017). Therefore, there is an urgent need for additional programs and support focused on reducing health challenges. Given these nutritional challenges, the primary priority of ICDS is to work on children's health and nutrition. At the forefront of the program, Anganwadi workers are mostly involved in

health and nutrition-related activities. Now they are expected to fulfil the educational needs of the children as well. How far is this possible? Moreover, Anganwadi workers continuously demand better working norms and adequate salaries. As they are not considered regular government employees, they are given fixed amounts as honorariums monthly. Instead of addressing their existing demands, they are given additional responsibilities. With these hardships, work overload, and government negligence, will they be able to provide "foundational education" to the new generation upon which the country's future lies?

Hunger is one of the enormous challenges that India faces. In the recently released "Global Hunger Index" (2020), India ranked 94 among 107 nations and is included in the 'serious' hunger category. This shows that millions of children cannot fulfil their proper nutritional requirements. Many children in rural areas attend schools because of the mid-day meal programme, where they can have nutritious food at least once. This programme has shown improvement in their health as well as an increase in GER. Now, NEP proposes providing breakfast and the mid-day meal to all children. Nevertheless, it is unclear how the budgetary requirements for this expansion will be met. Although NEP proposes to spend 6% of GDP on education, a continuous recommendation since the first policy in 1968, the country has not been able to spend beyond 3.1%. This means that a significant increase in budgetary allocation and proper sectoral fund distribution is required to meet the educational and nutritional requirements of the next generation.

Along with physical health, Children's mental health is a critical concern that cannot be ignored. However, NEP is surprisingly silent on this front. There is frequent news about suicide cases due to psychological pressures in academics or failure in various competitive examinations, which highlights the urgent need to raise awareness about mental health, starting from the early years of schooling. One remedy could be to include some activities related to mental health awareness in the regular curriculum. Additionally, some studies advocate including regular mindful practices in the curriculum for better attention and enhanced mental abilities in children (Narayanan & Singh, 2022; Singh & Narayanan, 2021). However, this requires active intervention from the government in recruiting mental health professionals. Currently, there are only three psychiatrists available per million people in India, according to WHO. While some private schools have started recruiting in-house counsellors, public schools hardly have any. To address this issue, there needs to be an increase in budgetary allocation specifically for mental health. According to a 2011 World Health Organization (WHO) report, India spends only 0.06% of its health budget on mental health compared to 4% of developed nations (Saha, 2017).

DISCUSSION

With the proposal of overhauling structural changes, it is expected that NEP will revolutionize the Indian education system

and shift it from the existing setup. However, many of the changes suggested in this policy were proposed by previous policies, such as the one in 1986 and the Kothari Commission Report in 1966. Furthermore, the RTE tried to meet similar objectives, and many aspects of NEP are already being practiced to a certain extent (Yenugu, 2022). However, even today, decade-old targets are being discussed without any conclusion. For instance, despite a 6% proposal since 1968, the budgetary allocation to education was only 3.1% of GDP in 2021–2022. India needs to focus on various fronts to implement this policy in an appropriate and timely manner. While implementing this policy, there are many priority sectors, but the shortage of teachers is one issue that needs utmost attention (Shakeel, 2021). Moreover, employing teachers on contract makes the problem more complex. According to a UNESCO report, 10% to 15% of schools in several States of India are single-teacher schools (Nanda, 2021). This results in teaching multiple classes together as well as performing non-teaching tasks by a single teacher, which leads to minor or no attention towards children. Proper training of the teachers is as important as filling the vacant positions. An interim solution can be to create a cluster of schools, and internet-based remote teaching can be introduced until the appropriate pupil-teacher ratio is maintained. The pandemic has made audio-video and internet-based teaching methods more prevalent, and they can continue until the vacant positions are filled. Meanwhile, proposed statutory bodies such as NCPFECCE, NCERT and SCERTs can work together to create and standardize content per the policy. Implementing the proposed changes in the policy may begin with taking these steps.

Although some of the objectives of this policy lack clarity, it can be evaluated more critically once implemented. However, if the overall recommendations of the policy are implemented properly, stepwise and in a timely manner, it can add ample value to the demographics of India. NEP 2020 has laid down a vision for the new India of the 21st century. It acknowledges the importance of experience-based learning and the development of critical thinking for the overall development of human beings. The policy emphasises identifying and training the diverse human potentials and inculcating moral, ethical, and constitutional values to create responsible citizens of the country and the world. It focuses on application-based pedagogies and developing multidisciplinary thoughts. It also brings hope that all kinds of work will be appreciated equally, decreasing the divide between labour and intellectual professions. Nevertheless, a policy document is only an 'intent' or 'guideline', and the main issue lies not with the written policy document's recommendations but with the plan's execution.

Challenges abound, whether it's budget allocation, creating infrastructure, enhancing the student-teacher ratio, or standardizing content and methods. It requires a great commitment with absolute integrity on the part of those entrusted with executing the policy.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights possible hindrances that may act as hurdles while implementing the policy. Given the socio-economic demographics of India, it's evident that health and nutritional challenges, along with minimal digital access, could become a significant impediment in realizing the vision of the NEP. This study may provide further avenues for discussion among stakeholders involved in implementing the policy. Without addressing the above-discussed challenges, it would be challenging to make a substantial difference in the current educational situation of the country. Ultimately, it's up to the political leaders and policymakers to realize the intent. It's about implementing and actualizing the proposals foresighted in the policy document. It's about investing more in infrastructure and capacity building of the teachers to ensure affordability and quality. At the same time, to implement the policy, the central and state governments have to work collaboratively as education is a concurrent subject. Therefore, governments should thoroughly discuss and scrutinize the pros and cons before implementing any significant structural changes. Otherwise, it may harm the upcoming generation and society more than it benefits.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments that significantly improved the manuscript. We also acknowledge the diligent efforts of the editors in ensuring the manuscript's quality. Additionally, we express our gratitude to the Ministry of Education (Government of India) for their continuous financial support throughout this work.

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