

Education, Society and the Idea of the Educated Person: A Philosophical-Sociological Analysis of the Evolution of Education Policies in India

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Abstract

Education policy is closely connected with the society in which it develops. Changes in education are therefore not only changes in curriculum, institutions or teaching methods; they also reflect changing ideas about the individual, citizenship, knowledge and social development. This paper examines the evolution of education policy in India from indigenous intellectual traditions and colonial education to the major post-Independence policy frameworks and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The study adopts a qualitative historical-interpretive methodology, combining analysis of major policy documents with perspectives from Indian philosophy and sociology of education. Particular attention is given to the Education Commission (1964–66), National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968, NPE 1986/1992 and NEP 2020, along with the educational thought of Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and B. R. Ambedkar. The paper argues that the purpose of education in India has changed with changing social circumstances: from knowledge and personal formation, to colonial administrative requirements, nation-building, social justice, human-resource development and, more recently, holistic development within a knowledge society. NEP 2020 is examined in this historical context rather than as an isolated reform. The paper argues that the policy represents neither a complete break from earlier educational thinking nor merely a continuation of it. Instead, it brings together several strands of India's educational history, including social justice, national development, Indian knowledge traditions, scientific inquiry, technological change and global engagement. The main contribution of the paper is a philosophical-sociological framework for understanding policy change through six questions: What is education for? What kind of learner does society want to develop? What kind of citizen is required? What knowledge is valued? How is inequality addressed? And what changes in society make educational reform necessary? By bringing these questions together, the study offers a way of reading Indian education policy as a reflection of changing ideas about the society India has been, the society it is, and the society it wishes to become.

Keywords: Indian Education Policy, National Education Policy 2020, Philosophy of Education, Sociology of Education, Educational Reform, Social Justice, Indian Knowledge Systems, Citizenship.

Introduction

Education has always been more than the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another. It influences how individuals understand themselves, their society and their responsibilities towards others. For this reason, education policy cannot be studied only through changes in curriculum, examinations or institutional structures. Behind every policy lies an idea of what education should achieve and, more importantly, what kind of person education should help create.

This question is particularly important in India because the country has experienced major social and political changes within a relatively short period. The transition from colonial rule to a democratic

republic, the effort to address historical inequalities, economic liberalisation, globalisation and rapid technological change have each altered the expectations placed on education.

Indian intellectual traditions provide an important starting point for understanding this wider conception of education. Knowledge was often associated with self-understanding, ethical development and the search for truth. At the same time, these traditions cannot be treated as one uniform educational system, nor can their historical social exclusions be ignored. Their relevance here lies in the fact that education was understood in several traditions as more than the acquisition of occupational skills.

The colonial period brought a different institutional orientation. Education became increasingly connected with the requirements of the colonial administration and with Western forms of knowledge. Yet colonial education also created new intellectual spaces for social reform and political consciousness.

Indian thinkers responded to this changing environment in different ways. Vivekananda emphasised character and the development of human potential (Vivekananda, 1963). Gandhi's *Nai Talim* connected learning with productive work, self-reliance and moral development (Gandhi, 1953). Tagore emphasised freedom, creativity and learning in close relationship with nature and culture (Tagore, 1917). Sri Aurobindo regarded education as the development of the whole person (Aurobindo, 1990). Ambedkar brought a different but essential perspective by linking education with dignity, equality and emancipation (Ambedkar, 1989).

After Independence, education acquired a new social purpose. It became an important instrument of nation-building, democratic citizenship, scientific development and social integration. The Education Commission (1964–66), popularly known as the Kothari Commission, placed education within the larger framework of national development and emphasised productivity, equality, modernisation and national integration (Education Commission, 1966).

NPE 1968 reflected these priorities. It emphasised national progress, common citizenship, national integration, science and technology, educational opportunity and moral and social values. NPE 1986, modified in 1992, subsequently gave greater attention to universalisation, women, disadvantaged communities, vocational education and educational technology.

The social context changed further after economic liberalisation. The expansion of higher education, information technology and global employment opportunities increased the importance of skills, innovation, employability and knowledge production.

NEP 2020 must therefore be read against this background. It proposes foundational learning, critical thinking, multidisciplinary education, vocational exposure, multilingualism, technology, equity and holistic development, while also giving explicit importance to Indian ethos and knowledge traditions.

The central argument of this paper is that **education policy changes when the social purpose of education changes**. The important question is therefore not simply what each policy introduced, but why particular educational priorities became important at particular moments in India's history.

Research Problem

Indian education policy has been widely studied from historical, economic, administrative and implementation perspectives. There is substantial literature on individual policies, access to education, inequality, curriculum, teacher education and the implementation of NEP 2020.

However, these discussions often remain separated. Historical studies explain earlier policies, while contemporary studies examine NEP 2020 and its implementation. Less attention has been given to the longer relationship between social change, educational purpose and the changing image of the educated person.

The research problem addressed by this paper is therefore, how has the evolution of education policy in India reflected changing conceptions of the individual, society, citizenship, knowledge and development, and how should NEP 2020 be understood in relation to these earlier educational visions?

This question matters because education policy is never socially neutral. It decides, directly or indirectly, what knowledge matters, whose knowledge is recognised, what skills are valued, what inequalities require intervention and what kind of citizen society needs.

Objectives of the Study

The study has four main objectives:

- To trace the evolution of major education policies in India from the colonial period to NEP 2020.
- To examine the philosophical and sociological ideas underlying changing educational priorities.
- To understand how changes in Indian society influenced educational policy.
- To identify the continuity, change and distinctive contribution of NEP 2020 within this longer history.

Research Methodology

The study uses a **qualitative historical-interpretive methodology**. It combines historical policy analysis, philosophical interpretation and sociological contextualisation.

The primary sources include major national education policy documents, particularly the Education Commission (1964–66), NPE 1968, NPE 1986/1992 and NEP 2020. Selected writings of Vivekananda, Gandhi, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Ambedkar are used to understand different ideas about human development, education and social change.

The analysis is organised around six questions:

- What is the purpose of education?
- What kind of learner is education expected to develop?
- What kind of citizen does society need?
- What forms of knowledge are valued?
- How does education respond to inequality?
- What social changes have influenced the policy?

The method is interpretive rather than evaluative. The paper does not attempt to measure the success of NEP 2020 or establish its impact on student outcomes. It examines the **ideas and assumptions contained in the policy** and places them within the longer evolution of Indian educational thought.

Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study can broadly be located within four areas.

The first concerns the history of Indian education. This literature shows that education developed through diverse intellectual and institutional traditions and that colonial rule brought significant changes in the organisation and purpose of education.

The second concerns post-Independence educational policy. The Kothari Commission remains particularly important because it treated education as part of national development rather than as an isolated sector. Its concerns included equality, productivity, modernisation and national integration (Education Commission, 1966).

NPE 1968 continued this developmental and nation-building approach. NPE 1986/1992 expanded the emphasis towards universalisation and educational equality, including specific attention to women and disadvantaged groups. The official Programme of Action includes separate sections on women's equality, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, minorities, disability, adult education, vocational education and educational technology.

The third body of literature is philosophical. The works of Vivekananda, Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo and Ambedkar show that Indian educational thought has never had a single definition of education. It has included ideas of character formation, freedom, self-development, productive work, cultural development and social emancipation.

The fourth concerns contemporary research on NEP 2020. Recent scholarship has examined its curricular, institutional and pedagogical reforms, as well as questions of implementation. Dey (2022), for example, examines its recommendations relating to school, teacher and higher education, while Menon (2024) places NEP 2020 within the substantially changed social and educational context that developed after the earlier national policy.

While existing studies have examined the historical development, philosophical foundations, social dimensions and implementation of Indian education policies, fewer studies bring these dimensions together to examine how changing social contexts have shaped the conception of the educated person across successive policy frameworks. Historical studies generally focus on the development of educational institutions and policies, while contemporary studies on NEP 2020 have largely concentrated on its provisions, pedagogical reforms and implementation challenges. There is therefore scope for a longitudinal analysis that connects these strands and asks how changes in Indian society have influenced the purpose assigned to education and the kind of person that education is expected to develop.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing policy history, Indian philosophical thought and sociology of education into a common analytical framework. It places the changing idea of the educated person at the centre of the analysis and examines this through six dimensions: the purpose of education, the conception of the learner, citizenship, knowledge, social justice and the wider social context.

Education Policy and Changing Indian Society

- **From Colonial Education to Nation-Building** - Colonial education changed the relationship between education and the state. Knowledge increasingly became associated with administrative requirements and Western education, particularly through the growing importance of English.

However, colonial education also created spaces for debate about Indian identity and social reform. This led Indian thinkers to question what education should mean in a society seeking both modernisation and cultural self-respect.

Independence created a new situation. Education now had to serve a democratic nation dealing with poverty, inequality, low literacy and the need for economic development.

The Kothari Commission captured this challenge by connecting education with national development, social integration, modernisation and equality (Education Commission, 1966).

- **NPE 1968: Education for National Development** - NPE 1968 emerged at a time when national integration and development were central concerns. Education was expected to develop scientific thinking, strengthen national unity and widen educational opportunity. The policy described education as vital to national progress and security and called for educational reconstruction linked with economic and cultural development.

The learner in this period was largely imagined as a **citizen of a newly developing nation**. Education had a public purpose: it was expected to contribute to national reconstruction rather than function primarily as a private investment.

- **NPE 1986/1992: Education and Social Justice**- By the 1980s, expansion of education had not removed social inequality. Questions of gender, caste, poverty, geographical disadvantage and educational access became more prominent.

NPE 1986 therefore expanded the role of education. Its Programme of Action addressed women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, minorities, persons with disabilities, adult education, vocational education, higher education and educational technology.

This was an important change in the meaning of equality. The issue was no longer simply whether education was available. It was increasingly about **who could actually benefit from it**.

Education was now expected to perform two functions at the same time: contribute to national development and help reduce social inequality.

- **Liberalisation and the Knowledge Economy** - The economic changes of the 1990s altered the educational landscape again. The expansion of professional education and information technology increased the importance of skills, employability and innovation.

Education began to be viewed increasingly as an investment in human capital. This was not necessarily a rejection of its social purpose, but it created a new tension: should education primarily prepare individuals for employment, or should it also help them become thoughtful, responsible and fulfilled human beings?

This tension is central to understanding NEP 2020.

NEP 2020 in Historical Perspective

NEP 2020 attempts to respond to several demands at the same time. It addresses foundational literacy and numeracy, multidisciplinary learning, vocational education, multilingualism, technology, critical thinking, equity and holistic development. The policy's stated vision is of an education system rooted in Indian ethos and contributing to an equitable and vibrant knowledge society. This combination is important.

Earlier policies generally emerged around a more identifiable dominant social concern. NPE 1968 was strongly associated with nation-building and development. NPE 1986 placed greater emphasis on equality and social transformation. NEP 2020 has to respond to several realities simultaneously: inequality, changing employment patterns, technology, global competition, new forms of knowledge and questions of cultural identity.

Its conception of the learner is consequently broader. The learner is not simply expected to remember information or obtain a qualification. NEP 2020 places importance on critical thinking, problem-solving and social and emotional skills alongside foundational literacy and numeracy.

The policy also seeks to reduce rigid boundaries between academic and vocational education and between different disciplines. It gives greater importance to multilingualism and Indian languages and explicitly brings Indian Knowledge Systems into the educational discussion.

This creates an important philosophical question: **Can education be rooted in Indian traditions while remaining open to scientific and global knowledge?**

The answer need not be either complete rejection of tradition or unquestioning acceptance of it. Indian knowledge traditions can be studied seriously while being examined through evidence, reason and comparison. In this sense, NEP 2020 offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between cultural continuity and intellectual openness.

The Changing Idea of the Educated Person

The central analytical finding of this paper is that the evolution of Indian education policy can be understood through the changing image of the **educated person**.

Historical Phase	Social Context	Dominant Purpose of Education	Image of the Educated Person
Indigenous intellectual traditions	Knowledge, ethical and personal formation	Development of the person	Seeker / learner
Colonial period	Administration and modern knowledge	Administration, modernisation and social mobility	Educated intermediary
NPE 1968	Nation-building	National development and integration	Citizen
NPE 1986/1992	Inequality and social development	Equality and empowerment	Social participant
Post-1991 period	Liberalisation, globalisation and technology	Skills, employability and productivity	Human capital
NEP 2020	Knowledge society and technological change	Holistic human development	Lifelong, capable and responsible citizen

This progression should not be read as a simple replacement of one model by another. Elements of the earlier conceptions remain present. The important point is that **each major social transition added a new expectation from the educated person**.

The learner as seeker did not disappear when the learner became a citizen. The citizen did not cease to have economic responsibilities when employability became important. Similarly, the economically capable learner of the knowledge economy cannot be separated from questions of ethics, citizenship and social responsibility.

NEP 2020 is significant precisely because it attempts to hold these expectations together.

Theoretical and Scholarly Contribution

The contribution of this study lies in offering a different way of understanding the evolution of education policy in India. Rather than examining policy change only through its objectives, institutional provisions or implementation, the study places the changing idea of the educated person at the centre of analysis. It argues that each major phase of educational reform emerged in response to a changing social context and consequently carried a particular expectation of what an educated individual should become.

The study also brings Indian philosophical thought into conversation with the historical development of education policy. The perspectives of Vivekananda, Gandhi, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Ambedkar are used to highlight different understandings of human development, freedom, social responsibility, cultural identity and emancipation. This helps avoid treating “Indian educational philosophy” as a single, uniform tradition.

A further contribution is the analytical framework developed through six questions: the purpose of education, the conception of the learner, citizenship, valued forms of knowledge, social justice and the wider societal context. This framework can be used to examine not only NEP 2020 but also future educational reforms and comparative policy developments.

The study therefore contributes to the discussion on Indian education by showing that changes in education policy can also be read as changes in the way Indian society imagines the educated person it needs.

Conclusion

The history of education policy in India is closely connected with the history of changing Indian society. Colonial modernity altered the institutional structure of education. Independence transformed education into an instrument of nation-building and democratic development. NPE 1968 emphasised national integration and development, while NPE 1986/1992 gave greater importance to equality, universalisation and social transformation. Economic liberalisation and technological change subsequently increased the importance of skills, innovation and knowledge production.

NEP 2020 has emerged from this accumulated history. It does not simply replace the earlier policies. Many of their concerns remain present: access, equality, national development, scientific thinking, multilingualism and social responsibility. At the same time, these concerns are being interpreted in a new context.

The distinctive feature of NEP 2020 is therefore not that it abandons the past, but that it attempts to bring several parts of that past into conversation with the demands of the present.

Its emphasis on Indian knowledge traditions raises questions of cultural identity; its emphasis on technology raises questions of access and inequality; its emphasis on employability raises questions about the wider purpose of education; and its emphasis on holistic development returns us to the older philosophical question of what it means to develop a human being.

The present study does not claim that NEP 2020 has already transformed Indian education. Its argument is more specific: **NEP 2020 represents a significant change in the way Indian education is being asked to imagine its purpose.** The Government itself has emphasised that implementation requires coordination between the Centre and States because education is a concurrent subject, and implementation initiatives continue across school and higher education.

The larger lesson from this study is that education policy is ultimately a statement about the future. It reflects what a society believes its children and young people will need, what values it wishes to preserve, what inequalities it wishes to correct and what kind of citizen it hopes to create.

The evolution of Indian education policy can therefore be read as an evolving answer to one fundamental question: **What kind of human being does India need to cultivate in order to become the society it aspires to be?**

NEP 2020 is the latest answer to that question—but it remains an answer that must be tested through implementation, experience and future research.

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