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**National Education Policy's Stance on Early
Childhood Care and Mental Health Inclusive
Education System**

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Abstract

Education is one of the most powerful weapons that can be used to change the world and open doors of success in various disciplines of life. It expands one's outlook on the world and develops the foundation of all our capabilities. Education is an essential component that interconnects numerous elements together for the evolution and development of a nation, and in the concretization of one such element, the government of India has dispensed- National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the missing pieces of the recently released NEP'2020 and to delineate the importance of the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) inclusive education system for an effective schooling and healthy functioning of students, acknowledging the exigency of a new set of priorities, commitments, strategies, and resources to implement and sustain effective supports for overall development, along with encapsulation of its ascendancy on India's socio-political ecosystem progression. A comparative analysis and a SWOT analysis have been performed to assert the cruciality of a regulatory mechanism for a constructive competitive ecosystem and to explore synergies of NEP's prosperous implementation. The authors have recommended measures and some potential solutions ranging from time-bound commitment towards NEP's foundational objectives, a sound regulatory system, to an indispensable budgetary expansion.

Key Words: *Mental health, Infrastructure, Early Childhood Care, Transformative, NEP, System, Budget, Implementation*

1.0 Introduction

While an educated person can be literate, every literate person cannot be educated. This archetypal statement strongly resonates with the ecosystem of education within which India lies. Literacy by definition is having the ability to write, learn and understand, while education is a much more wholesome and holistic measure that covers the personality, ethics, pragmatic knowledge, and experience in addition to literacy. In layman's terms, literacy is just a step towards gaining an education. Universal and quality education is a human right and is principal in achieving many sustainable goals. Education is a powerful tool with the potential to provide structure and stability for communities that are fragile and have been isolated from the sector of formal academia for years, simply by making room for the growth of these people and thus ameliorating the entire unit.

The truth today is that more than 70% of rural primary school kids are undergoing poor learning outcomes, and this makes up a big part of our education sector. Multiple surveys also point to the fact that 50% of students in grade 5 cannot read a grade 2 text or solve a simple subtraction problem. The harsh reality of our country is that the socio-economic environment of the household dictates the quality and the duration of schooling a child will receive, opportunities of growth a child will be provided with, and essentially the life that an innocent child will lead as an adult. There is a vicious cycle at play that is harming a plethora of isolated and marginalized communities which when leveraged can become the building blocks that support the very economy of the country.

India is an agile country with rapidly changing population dynamics. Currently, India takes the pedestal for being the country with the highest number –a staggering 600 million– of young adults below the age of 25. With 66% of the 250 million students in the age group below 14 enrolled in schools, India has a golden chance to use this scenario as a fueling mechanism to propel a shift towards a demographic dividend. If India chooses to act now and expand its education sector, retain “out of the school” students, ensure completion of education for low rigour students, and provide useful skills to the youth, then India can swiftly forge ahead and compete with marginally better-developed countries (Unesco data).

Education builds the overall framework of a society's economic, political, and social development and it is directly responsible for a nation's future. Hence, to promote the importance of education in the country, the government has taken up reforms in the past by introducing the National Education Policy (NEP) in 1968, which focused on providing quality education to all with an inclusive model irrespective of caste, religion, region or disability. But the dominant western notion of childhood has often ignored the caste and gender realities in the vast geography of India, creating significant hurdles in the physical and intellectual development of the children.

In unison with the fast-paced growth of technology, communication, culture, and the rising interest in education, the revised NEP of 1986/92 also failed to inculcate an emphasis on ECCE, greater attention to unprivileged children, women empowerment, child nutrition, infrastructure, and technological advancement, mental health and the elimination of inherited social barriers due to exiguous funding and commitments. In acknowledgement of the rapidly shifting world, the ambiguities of previous policies necessitated the policymakers and researchers to introduce the NEP'2020 with its focus on universal high-quality education to maximize our country's rich talents and resources for the good of the individual and the society. To achieve the fullest potential of human beings, strengthening the ECCE and ECMH structure is a prerequisite. With 85% of the development of a child's cumulative brain happening before the age of 6, unsettling interferences in the early stages of life can lead to lifelong implications impacting their physical and mental well-being. In preparation to provide positive cognitive growth and long-term prosperity of individuals, it is crucial to develop and establish an integrated foundational design that focuses on the ECCE and ECMH effectively with consideration of the ground realities for the successful accomplishment of the NEP.

Hence, this paper aims to outline the challenges that may hinder the effective implementation of NEP 2020. It explores the post-independence education crisis, the impact of government-initiated policies to tackle the predicament, the need for ECCE and ECMH to address the immediate challenges of universal high-quality education, with encapsulation of mental health-centric approach and repercussions on the social-political ecosystem.

Besides, monitoring the allocation of the budget with other states to compare the spending on the education sector, highlights the desideratum for an indispensable budgetary expansion. More or less the paper offers a futuristic outlook, suggesting measures with a focus on mental health, flexibility in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, revision of the RTE, necessitated allocation of budget, etc. (centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2013).

2.0 Why ECCE

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was introduced into the policy framework of India in 1986 with the remediation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968. ECCE is seen as one of the most effective investments in development as it lays the foundation for a child's lifelong learning. Quality ECCE is also critical in determining a child's life outcomes far beyond the school, in terms of health and income levels. Further evidence has linked ECCE to social returns such as lower crime rates and better citizenship. (Central Square Foundation, n.d.) The ECCE or more popularly known pre-school education programs focus on providing proper psychological, social and physical development of a child below six years of age with a long-term focus on improving formal sector education enrollments, reducing school dropouts, and safeguarding the future of the youth by making sure that they are adept with skills required to get a job, thus reducing social and economic inequalities that exist in the society.

2.1 ECCE in Indian Context

The India Early Childhood Education Impact (IECCEI) study, conducted by the ASER Centre and the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development (CECCED), indicates that children who were exposed to high-quality ECCE were more 'school-ready' than those who were not. The five-year longitudinal study tracked close to 13,000 children across 3 states in India and showed that building children's cognitive, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills during the ECCE stage improves their learning outcomes in early primary classes. As per the 2011 census, children in the age group of 0-6 years constitute around 158 million population of India.

Currently, under India's chief child welfare scheme, namely Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), only 48% of children below the age of six have enrolled in any form of the pre-schooling institution while more than 20% of this population is still insulated from this policy structure despite the growth in governmental and private nurseries and pre-primary schools under the ECCE initiative (cbpolicystudies, 2020).

2.2 Essential Components of ECCE

Early education ensures free, integral, and harmonious development of children's personalities, according to their rhythm and needs. ECCE to date has been a flagship step by the government of India towards building the education component of ICDS as with this policy all state governments shifted their attention and state funds towards the development of a standardized ECCE curriculum and teacher training. This was further carried out in a differentiated way so that it stimulated every child towards creative thinking, exploration of the environment, and their own identity, with autonomous learning experiences.

Effective early childhood care mainly focuses on a child's right to play, enact and learn from various forms of imitation. The pre-school curriculum spotlights extensive development of a child and hence includes activities and games that are played in small groups that allow the kids to socialize progressively, connect them with the social and cultural environment and get a foundational grasp in mathematics, languages, mainly reading and writing and the ethics of communication. During this period, the teacher is fully responsible for choosing the activities and structuring the lesson plan depending on the objectives they wish to achieve (EURYDICE, European Commission, 2019).

2.3 Models of Early childhood Education in India (Anganwadi vs Private education centres)

Only recently, India has started seeing Early Childhood Care and Education as the cornerstone for a child's comprehensive physical and cognitive development and by this, India has brought forward the notion of an 'Integrated learning unit' comprising academic institutions that deal with kids of age group 6 years and below under the 12th Five-year plan.

With the advent of ECCE under Integrated Child Development Services in 2013, there has been a massive expansion in the number of governmental Anganwadi centres as well as private nurseries and pre-primary schools in Rural India, both of which follow very different standards while divulging in ECCE.

Private nurseries and preschools charge parents from Rs.500 to 1000 promising the parents to make their child proficient in English, literacy, and numeracy. In the four-walled structure of the privately-owned institutions, the teachers tutor the kids with English nursery rhymes and rote learning regressive RRR (reading, writing, and arithmetic) techniques that make no sense to young kids as they are unable to form any connection of these activities with their natural environment. Under the shadows of grading students on their achievements and the false banner of English leading to better job opportunities in the cities, private establishments have made pre-school education as a business more than a scaffolded and safe ecosystem created to leave a lasting positive impact on a child.

Although private schools do lead to short-term results in literacy and numeracy by the cramming approach, in the longer term these academies fail in adding any real value towards a child's growth. Multiple scholars have admitted that most teachers in privately owned preschools operating in rural areas are under-trained in the areas of child pedagogy, as hiring trained professionals would cut the surplus of these centres. This essentially creates a double disadvantage for many low-income rural families as they end up spending a significant proportion of their income on private academies, while their children also remain deprived of the proper impetus towards the motor and cognitive development required to enter primary schools

postage 6.

In contrast to these private centres, the government wielded free-of-charge Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) that work as a downward extension to primary schools, predominantly focusing on the nutritional, motor, sensory and emotional development of the child's brain by coherently linking local ethos and dialects of the community. They use techniques and strategies that are driven towards social interaction, visual art, and self-learning from their surrounding environment by giving free time spaces to the kids. They use colourful and vibrant props and puzzles to teach students alphabets and numbers.

These centres not only teach students pre-numeracy and literacy but also inculcate the ethics and values of their community that bind these children together and make education relevant to them. While the AWCs have teachers who are a part of the community and teach in vernacular dialects, thereby creating an inclusive environment, they still lack formal training and are not considered teachers but honoraries or social workers. AWCs additionally lack good infrastructure and aids due to paucity of funds and follow an inconsistent routine that is informally decided by the community itself (Gadgil, 2020). The data received from multiple sources however predicts a rather substantial rift between the impacts created by the two institutions. Although both these institutions have a very varied approach to ECCE, neither of them stringently follows the established progressive methods like art and play therapy to establish a sense of expression in students. Thus, countering the premise of disseminating an education that will help the kids sustain themselves in higher standards, essentially massively failing in cultivating a foundation layer for students to allow a smooth transition into primary schools (Unicef, India, 2019).

2.4 Some Organizations in India working in Early Childhood Development

- A) Karadi Path Education Company: Karadi Path Education Company Pvt. Ltd. is an offshoot of Karadi Tales. They have been working towards deconstructing the way we learn language naturally from our environment and reconstructing a similar process for the classroom.
- B) Pratham: Pratham's Early Childhood Education program works for the holistic development of children in the age group of 3-6 years through the use of local resources, low-cost and appropriate material, and involvement of caregivers. To improve children's basic abilities, Pratham focuses on five broad developmental domains: physical development, socio-emotional development, cognitive development, language development, and creative development.
- C) Key Education Foundation: Key Education Foundation works with children from low-income communities to ensure that they get the best start in life. They build holistic preparedness of children and their families through a strong and sustainable School Readiness Program.

- D) Klay Schools: Klay Schools are private pre-school education providers with over 2000 KLAY educators spread across 100+ centres in India.
- E) Learning Matters Foundation: Intending to ensure that children experience joy and success in learning, Learning Matters Foundation combines research on learning and teaching with classroom practices. Their Early Years program directly corresponds to ECD years.
- F) Makkala Jagriti: Makkala Jagriti facilitates holistic development for children and diverse groups, in and around the community, to build a sustainable and equitable society. Through their Early Childhood Care and Education program, they influence Anganwadis (Govt. Pre-school centres) to become spaces for the holistic development of children, with a special focus on enhancing early learning capabilities.
- G) Mobile Creches: Provide holistic development to children between the age of birth to six while fighting for their rights nationally. Some of their projects include the program at construction sites which ensures creche services to 5,000 children of migrant workers, at 40 locations in Delhi/NCR. The program at 7 slum settlements in Delhi reaches out to 5000 children of slum dwellers, through family-based interventions and access to state services.
- H) Saarthi Education: To bring about sustained, positive behaviour change in parents, Saarthi equips parents with core parenting knowledge, attitudes, and practices so they are empowered to effectively engage with their children at home.

2.5 Potential impact of new NEP'20 on ECCE

Emergent NEP 2020 has tried to bridge the difference in implementation that may arise since ECCE is imposed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, while education post 6 years of age commencing from grade 1 comes under the Ministry of Human Resources. To do so, it proposes to promulgate a rudimentary layer of education unifying pre-primary and primary education, essentially bringing 3 years of ECCE in the ambit of formal education. Although it aims to ease the access and affordability of ECCE, the policy unwittingly creates a superficial demand for the same, and this leads to a spurt of private institutions that do not follow the guidelines mentioned in the NEP 2020.

The burgeoning of private schools, also directly leads to competition amongst institutions, which unnecessarily leads to a very results-oriented ecosystem in the case of early childcare and education. In an attempt to rake the numbers, academic centres tend to elevate the level of education imparted in these institutions from pre-numeracy and literacy to higher grade 2 and 3 appropriate syllabi. This further adds needless pressure on a child's brain leading to digression from the development in sensory, motor, and communication regions, which should be the heart of their curriculum at this tender age. Additionally, this process lowers the influence of syllabi presented in higher grades adding to the learning gap leading to a crisis in the arena of education.

Seeing the potential negative repercussions of this policy, the policymakers must include a check or a regulatory mechanism to insulate the ECCE centres from a free-market, business-driven model. On the same lines, the NEP 2020 overlooks any official degree or certification necessarily required to be a teacher in pre-primary schools and AWC centres, rather it very conveniently mentions a six-month to a one-year training program that will be contingent on the applicants past educational qualifications. However, this brings a question as to whether a voluntary training program does justice to the significance of ECCE in cultivating and moulding young minds. Lastly, with the budget allocation to the education sector, it's very clear that there will be no hike in the remuneration given to teachers in AWCs which might disincentivize eligible applicants from partaking in this scheme. Thus, although well intended, NEP 2020 is not yet truly sound in nature and thus has scope for improvement, as it is very myopic and discounts the implicit impacts created by it (Majumdar, 2020).

3.0 Importance of ECMH

3.1 What is ECMH and how it is lacking in the NEP

Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) is the developing structure that formulates the overall development and architecture of a child's brain through significant early life experiences, relationships, and environment. It shapes capacities for learning, ability to cope up with a range of emotions, future development in context to family, community, and later behaviour. According to researchers, more than one million neural connections develop every 5 seconds in the first 6 years of a child's life which creates a foundation of their emotional health.

As they mature with time, it establishes the basis of their growth and wellbeing in essential areas of life that include cognitive skills, language, social skills, literacy, their approach to learning and readiness for school; compromises/disruptions to which can lead to serious lifelong consequences like stunted physical health, immature growth of the brain and mental problems in adulthood that may deteriorate the person's true potential.

Fortunately, a sound understanding and guidance towards improving children's environment and experiences can be a cost-effective solution to multiple problems all at once. For this purpose, we must internalize the importance of ECMH taking into account all the elements that ensure a valuable and effective education system.

Hence, the government has proposed NEP 2020, in contrast to the previous policies and their unfinished agenda for major developments in India's education system. "The New Education Policy envisions a system that emphasizes the development of the creative potential of each individual. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities - both the 'foundational capacities' of literacy and numeracy and 'higher-order' cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem-solving – but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions."

Though envisioning the overarching goal of ensuring universal access to high-quality education and implementing are two different things, the inclusive model fails to recognize the complex issues there may be, with a large number of factors like gender, place of birth, adversity, socio-economic conditions, and unstable household environments that affect children's ability to stay in school, pay attention, make healthy life choices & form connections with the present world, which leads to wide disparities in levels of exposure and capabilities. Moreover, it does not take into account the children's home and community context e.g. limited or no exposure to literacy practices at home and limited understanding of the standard version taught at school; it also assumes that school education is the sole medium for the overall well-being of children and youth in India. Nevertheless, the incapacitating impacts of such radical issues on millions of children calls for a radical change in the traditional learning environment, with a definite focus on embrative growth and a practical roadmap of implementation for a system that truly serves its purpose of promoting prosperity in all areas of human experiences.

3.2 Integrated Curriculum for ECMH

There's no doubt that early intervention of ECMH focused actions and programs at the earliest stages of a child's life can prevent both short term-term and long-term mental disorders and enable children and adolescents to maximize their potential, increasing their chances of mentally healthy adulthood. However, it is also important to deliver such interventions through improved and better education, with an indispensable sports integrated curriculum that keeps in check one's physical and emotional health, promotes leadership qualities, improved discipline, higher self-esteem, effective time management skills, positive monitoring, healthy outlook towards life, reduction in academic stress, better perseverance, patience, and ultimately gives them the taste of healthy competition, insightful learning of success, failures, fosters good individual and sportsmanship with its key thrust of sound mental health.

Consequently, to get a deeper understanding of ECMH and sports integrated curriculum effects on the student a survey was conducted by the authors that shows that 82% of the students under the age of 18 feel that a better understanding of ECMH and sports incorporated education systems could have altered their experiences, abilities, understanding, and choices in life. Mental health promotion involves actions that improve psychological well-being, creating an environment that supports, respects, and protects basic, civil, political, socio-economic, and cultural rights is fundamental to mental health. Hereby, taking this forward, the NEP can allocate an ECMH friendly budget in the educational institutions, tracking the system of students' emotional well-being through interactive groups discussions, training sessions for stakeholders, collaboration with volunteers and therapists, the development of a strong infrastructure to minimize the negative impacts and promote the improvement of the education system.

3.3 Impacts of NEP and mental health-centric approach on the social-economic and political ecosystem

1 out of 3 people suffer from mental health problems, impeding the ability of children and youth to live a productive and satisfying life, yet there is a conspicuous absence of any mention of the significance of promoting mental health in the New Education Policy 2020 and its impacts on the social-political and economic ecosystem that the overall development of a country depends on.

It has been highly depreciated in the past & it is still a western notion in the Indian context. Nevertheless, it is one of the most pressing issues of our time that holds the power of changing the whole dynamic of an enormous social-economic cost. On the contrary, if addressed from an early stage of life with the inclusion of effective integrated programs and policies, responsive social care services, and preventive strategies in the education system, it can generate an all in one adaptive solution for long term deep-rooted issues within society that are of national importance.

Despite this, only 0.5 % of the total healthcare budget was allocated to mental health, creating a shortage of funds to resolve the mental illness cost implications for society. Thus, the NEP must develop a new approach for the promotion of mental well-being. There's a growing body of evidence that shows that adequate emphasis on ECMH, treatment, and awareness can create opportunities for India to reboot its economy and reflect on the dire need for boosting employment, controlling suicide rates, promoting gender inequity, and removing structural inequalities and their impacts that disrupt India's true potential of becoming a global superpower. Hence, in illustration of how sound mental health and education can help the government achieve the real objectives of the country, there's a need to take an account of unemployment — people who suffer from common mental health problems like depression, anxiety, PTSD have experienced more loss of productivity, workplace discrimination, issues with finances, decreased sense of motivation to make a change, building and maintaining relationships with friends and family all in all affecting their employment prospects, wages and the ability to compete with the present world, contributing for an increase in unemployment, etc.

Similarly, homelessness and suicides are both inherently connected to mental illnesses, substance abuse, unemployment, poverty, lack of confidence, and faulty beliefs which make people question their need to change, seek treatment and participate in the multi-facets of life. As per the WHO census, about 800,000 people with underlying mental health problems die due to suicide, which is the third leading cause of death in children.

Secondly, in consideration of another equally important ground reality that is crucial for the transformation of India's educational space, it is important to focus on gender disparities and discrimination.

We have long been aware of institutionalized patriarchy, pervasive sexism, hysterical discrimination, and the oppression and victimization that women face on the account of superstitious beliefs that make them more prone to mental health problems than men. As a result, this creates great hardships for women empowerment, education, reduction of the gender gap, and other issues. Moreover, with the genre of challenges COVID-19 has flushed out, education and mental health have been the biggest victims of all, affecting approximately 320 million children all over the country, which certainly highlights the need for a transformative policy now more than ever.

Therefore this is the time that we address the exigency of a mental health-centric approach in a visionary policy like NEP and strengthen our system to unleash its true potential with a dynamic commitment towards its implementation (Munjal, 2020), (Ravi, 2020).

3.4 SWOT Analysis of NEP 2020

Furthermore, a comprehensive overview of the new draft of NEP 2020 lays out a prophecy for evolution with its fair share of objectives and crippling challenges that have affected India's education system for over three decades.

<u>Strengths</u>	<u>Weakness</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="250 1163 776 1415">1. The NEP calls for universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary schools that is a necessary foundation for all future schooling and lifelong learning.<li data-bbox="250 1436 769 1799">2. It focuses on curtailing dropout rates and ensuring universal access to education at all levels by bringing dropouts back into the system and universal participation by careful tracking of students' enrolment and available opportunities.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="870 1163 1399 1360">1. Developing foundational skills is a complex issue as there are a large number of factors that impact children's ability to learn.<li data-bbox="870 1381 1399 1688">2. It ignores the ineffective infrastructure and facilitating system bring of dropouts into the system and solutions to the large variations in dropout rates that exist across states, gender, ethnicity, and class.

<p>3. The policy seeks to ensure universal high-quality ECCE with special attention to the strengthening of the education system and priority to districts & locations that are particularly socio-economically disadvantaged.</p> <p>4. NEP is largely focused on providing more flexibility for students, inclusive classrooms, assessments skill gap, digitalization, structural redesigning of the existing structure of the school curriculum to 5+3+3+2 covering the ages 3-18 aimed at creating a strong base for the ECCE to promote better development and well-being of children.</p>	<p>3. To achieve universal access to ECCE, it heavily relies on Anganwadis or the successful implementation of the NEP, which creates an undue burden on the workers with duties that may lead to resistance.</p> <p>4. With overall areas of NEP that focus on the importance of ECCE, more flexibility in higher education, and digitalization, it impeccably neglects the lack of access to technology-related infrastructure and training for smooth functioning within the educational institution.</p>
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p>	<p><u>Threats</u></p>
<p>1. The policy's new holistic approach towards digitalization gives the ed-tech industry new space to grow in and make education more accessible to students irrespective of their location, and a chance to create diverse employment opportunities.</p>	<p>1. Envisioning a policy on paper and implementing it are on different poles of reality. In a country where one faulty system is the result of another disrupted system, it poses a great threat to the aim of the NEP.</p>

<p>2. NEP provides ample opportunities & flexibility for youngsters to pursue their interests and line of careers which minimizes student migration to other global competitors for remunerative employment prospects and gives India a compelling chance of economic uplift.</p> <p>3. An effective framework for the implementation of nep can generate plenty of social and political opportunities and play a large role in the community learning supporting strategies for the survival of the marginalized section of society.</p>	<p>2. The policymakers have inherently talked about including more trained academicians in the decision-making bodies for proper regulation within the education sector, however, the de bureaucratization of education policy is a far-fetched dream.</p> <p>3. A pandemic that gave rise to forced digitalization in the education sector and has enhanced the inequalities and key concerns of education that have long prevailed in the system hinder the potential of overall development and evolution.</p>
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3.5 Can the NEP reach the said goals?

In a country where the enactment of a policy largely depends on the will of bureaucrats, it is hard to predict that such vague ideas may turn into reality without any lucid approach to execute the grand vision. For instance, in the exploration of loopholes and primary obstacles that are fundamental factors in anticipation of a lucrative implementation of NEP following are the chief concerns:

- Absence of affirmative action towards the infrastructure required for NEP and accountability towards the commitment of increased budget for the education sector.
- Ignorance towards the digital divide, impact of the cultural and traditional shift in the higher education ecosystem

- Unsynchronized and cross-border coordination of inter-ministerial and educational institutions under the dominance of bureaucrats.
- Exclusion of the unrepresented/underrepresented identities and disregard of existing structural inequalities.
- Failure of handling the regulatory system that modulates the mechanisms of administration/stakeholders responsible for the overall improvement.
- Deficiency of commitment for a necessitated increase in appropriations.

Bearing these in mind, unless the government decides to prioritize and promote policies and programs that involve action to improve labour, justice, transport environment, gender inequalities, housing welfare, socio-economic, cultural rights, etc. and targets the key concern/loopholes with time-bound and measurable commitments to avoid any hurdles in the successful implementation of NEP, the future of such a visionary policy seems unpredictable and a far-fetched dream (Indian Policy Collective, 2020).

4.0 Is NEP a dynamic policy?

Challenges with virtual teaching, the academic year 2020:

The challenges this academic year are many, which would impact the lives of underprivileged sections of society the most. On the one hand, the prevalent digital-divide in Indian society coupled with the lack of digital infrastructure in the education system appears to be the biggest challenge. It seems that the learning gaps would increase as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the deterioration of the socio-economic and familial aspects of a learner's life would negatively affect his/her socio-emotional health.

On the other hand, the present teachers' community is also not well-versed with the use of technology for teaching, thereby making the entire scenario all the bleaker.

The current statistics for contractual elementary school teachers stands at a total of 10,93,166 and multiple surveys delineate that states like Delhi and Bangalore as well as states like Bihar have not supported the teachers in any way, they have not been provided with any remuneration let alone relief funds or aids to continue their services when they were the primary volunteers towards ration drives within the district/ communities.

Thus, despite the unfolding of NEP 2020, with an enormous focus on curriculum, if more attention and care is not given to the people who impart education then it can lead to a colossal breakdown of goals NEP wishes to achieve post the pandemic era.

Although the NEP'20 states that it has paved the way for Ed Tech firms to collaborate and establish a platform that will provide a host of e-courses and tools for easy functioning of experiential learning, not just limited to Hindi and English but several other languages, it neglects the faults that exist with its pre-existing virtual platforms. The present virtual learning platforms, although very student and teacher-friendly, do not provide much data in vernacular dialects. Seeing the current circumstances wherein there has been the displacement of the migrant population, many students are blocked away from any kind of communication from friends and teachers, thus getting clarification regarding the lessons that are taught in a language foreign to them is difficult. Furthermore, there are many small villages and districts in our country where there exists no electrification, let alone smooth net connectivity, thus before working on the virtual platforms, the NEP must also focus on the accessibility aspect.

Thus, overcoming these challenges would require looking at the education sector with an entirely new perspective. We need to set new, practical, and relevant objectives, visions, and strategies. At the same time, we need to keep empowering the teacher and the taught by providing all the necessary support in terms of training and technological facilities.

5.0 Recommendations

5.1 Indispensable budgetary expansion

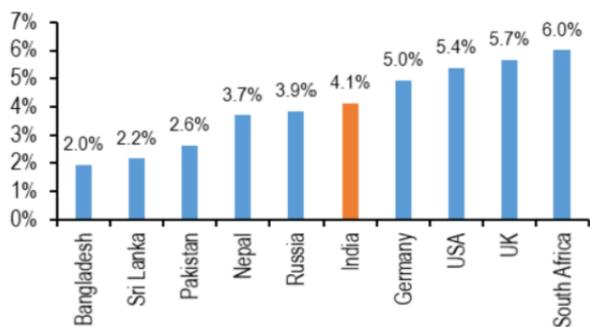
The NEP 2020 which aims to revolutionize the Indian education system has been doing rounds for its holistic development approach and its large set of objectives for providing universal high-quality education to all irrespective of the social obstacles, with its overall focus on areas including childhood care, curriculum design, language /medium teacher training, evaluation and assessment, exam, format, teacher appraisal, norms for universities and provision to bring children between the age of 3-18 under the RTE. Despite the commitment to significantly raise educational investment to 6% (a recommendation first made by nep 1968 and retreated by 1986, reaffirmed in the 1992 review of the policy), the current public expenditure of about 4.43% of GDP, which is low compared to what other countries spend on education.

Moreover, with considerable acknowledgement of existing gaps in the system, it instantaneously raises concerns of lower budget allocation for the objectives of NEP with an emphasis on the increasing use of technology, equality in education, teacher training, prioritized infrastructure with additional fanfare of covid19 impacts on the country. This calls for a strategic action plan with a substantial increase in the allocation of the budget to address the most crucial aspects of implementation. To enumerate this, the school education sector is heavily unfunded with urgent recruitment of adequate teachers to ensure quality education to all, focus on bringing children age between 3 and under18 for universalization of education without an inefficient infrastructure and socio-economic conditions can easily make matters worse.

NEP'S highly ambitious and exclusionary nature also requires a mechanism that proportionates the economic viability with other states and their budgetary allocation on education. Therefore to provide quality education, the budget allocation needs to be much higher than 6% with more focus on the gender-responsive budgeting and mental health incorporated curriculum for a successful implementation of nep and elimination of social issues that are of national importance and hinders the overall development. To explore the argument further in correspondence to a feasible implementation of NEP;

The union budget this year is expected to give a thrust to the budget in the education sector due to the announcement of the ambitious NEP 2020 policy. To accentuate its efficacy in tandem with the changes brought in by the pandemic, the government will have to constructively allocate the budget to empower state and central bodies to carry out smoother functioning of the education sector.

With the trends analyzed, it can be concluded that in the past few years, the government has at most kept the funds constant, instead of increasing to at least a double as advised by multiple scholars going into the education sector. The following is a graphical representation (left) comparing the allocation of the budget towards education in the various developing and developed economies with that of India for the financial year 2017- 2018 with a tabular representation (right) of the budget allotted for education in the past few years.



Year	Public expenditure (Rs crore)	% of GDP
2013-14	4,30,879	3.84%
2014-15	5,06,849	4.07%
2015-16	5,77,793	4.20%
2016-17	6,64,265	4.32%
2017-18	7,56,945	4.43%

Sources - (Left Panel) Educational statistics at Glance 2018, MHRD; PRS

- (Right panel) 312nd Report, Standing Committee on Human Resource Development, March 2020; PRS

5.2 Ed Tech

The surfacing of Covid-19 has led to significant alterations in the educational system allowing for a blended version of on-ground as well as virtual learning and teaching. Due to this, the government should pivot its attention not on opening new schools and academic institutions but rather on capacity building; revamping the ones that already exist with computer labs, digital libraries, virtual platforms, and workforce training for all the stakeholders. Further, the budget should also allow for some tax incentives/rebates or relaxation in setting up star-ups in ed-tech as they have fueled the shift towards e-learning during the pandemic.

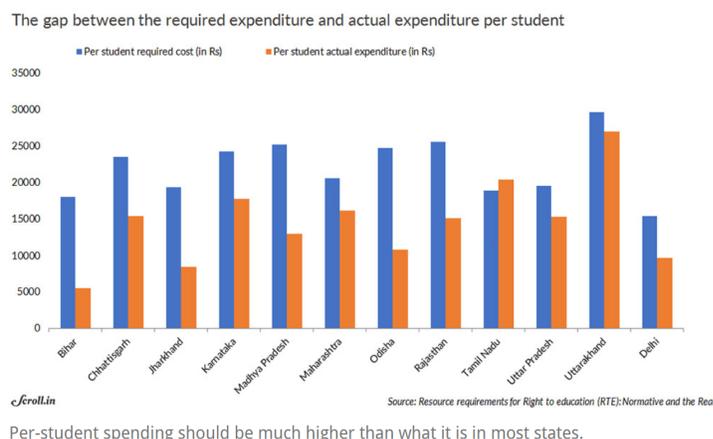
Owing to this, in the current circumstances, it is imperative to devote a substantial amount of time and monetary resources towards the expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technological advancements to keep this system from languishing even after the arrival of NEP'20 (Vaishnav, 2020).

Facilities	Primary schools (Class 1-5)	Upper primary schools (Class 1-8)	Higher senior secondary schools (Class 1-12)
Library	79.8%	88.0%	94.4%
Librarian	1.5%	4.5%	34.4%
Playground	54.9%	65.5%	84.3%
Functional computer	4.4%	25.2%	46.0%
Internet connection	0.9%	4.2%	67.9%

Sources - Flash statistics on school education 2016-17, USDISE; PRD

5.3 State Disparity

Research points towards the tendency of the states to underspend on the share per student in the ambit of educational expenditure. Expenditure especially in the area of early education (EE) is primarily allocated by the state governments. While the states accord a large portion of the funds to early education post the commencement of, “Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan”, yet their share in total has been dwindling since 2000. Further, survey findings state that well-off states tend to brush off early education by spending less % of their GDP as compared to poorer states.



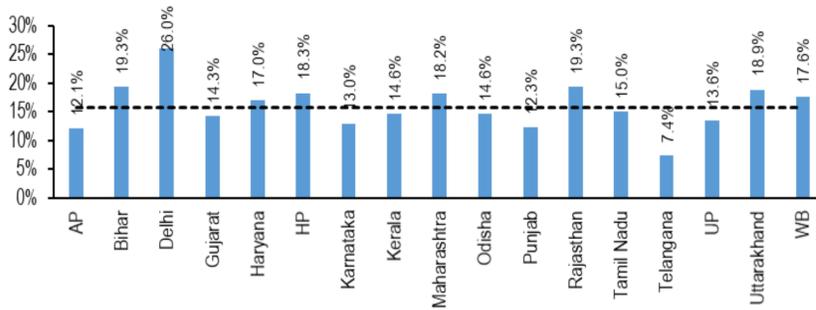
Per-student spending should be much higher than what it is in most states.

If we only talk about the education sector, states are mandatorily required to spend 15% of their budget on education. This has been followed by only some states such as Delhi, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, and West Bengal, while the other states have been curtailing the amount mentioned in the guideline.

Even amongst the states that are allocating the said budget to education, only Tamil Nadu can properly execute the per-student spending to the level that is appropriate.

Sources - Panel 1 - resource requirements for Right to Education (RTE): Normative and the real

- Panel 2 - Analysis of various state budget documents; PRS



Note: AP is Andhra Pradesh, UP is Uttar Pradesh, HP is Himachal Pradesh and WB is West Bengal.

Sources: Analysis of various state budget documents; PRS.

Thus, it becomes amply clear that the states are required to set up a monitoring body to check that the funds are reaching the beneficiaries, along with a standardized and

progressive method of allotting state budget, with states with the lowest development in the education getting more budget while the ones with higher development getting a moderate budget (centre for Policy Research, 2014).

6.0 Conclusion

Overall, NEP 2020 is a phenomenal policy with a holistic framework that can lead to a favourable and scalable impact towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It's a radical policy not only due to its flexible, holistic, and multifaceted structure but also with its centrality around Indian ethos and community building along with 21st-century tech skills necessary for penetrating the workforce. Although this reform was long-awaited, it's still not entirely ideal, the NEP' 20 can be marginally remediated by focusing more on a consolidated curriculum with attention toward early childhood mental health, psychologically scaffolded, and cathartic activities. Furthermore, despite being a very cogent policy, its key to success lies in its implementation. For favourable outcomes, NEP'20 also needs to alter itself more in the direction of teacher training, restoration of infrastructure, and capacity building together with strong tie-ups amongst education, skill, and labour ministry. There is a need to establish a better tracking system for the policy to insulate the ecosystem from profit pursuing businessmen along with unaccounted transfers that are ratified from centre to state but never efficiently used or received by the beneficiaries and to keep a check on the intermediate goals leading to the final goals.

Given the challenges the pandemic has brought, with a larger focus on healthcare, public distribution system, food inflation, and decaying employment along with a declining tax-GDP ratio, it becomes challenging yet indispensable to administer a considerable section of the union budget (6 or higher) towards education to realize greater impacts of NEP'20, else it might turn completely futile in the coming years.

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