

Deconstructing Policy Paradigm Shifts: A Comparative Analysis of Governance, Equity, and Access in NPE 1986 and NEP 2020

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Abstract

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, drafted by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, authorized by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, are two landmark papers that have influenced India's educational policy environment. This study compares and contrasts the two programs using three criteria: governance, equity, and access. It then questions if NEP 2020 signifies a true paradigm shift or if it is a structural continuation of the social-justice and decentralization promises made in 1986. This paper presents the results of an original stakeholder-perception survey (n = 260) that included educators, college and university administrators, professors, and researchers in the field of education policy. It also includes a quantitative analysis of secondary indicators, such as trends in the literacy rate, the gross enrolment ratio, and the gender parity index, which were derived from data collected by the Census of India and the All India Survey on Higher Education. While both programs aim to ensure that everyone has equal access to quality education, NEP 2020 has different regulatory framework, approaches vocational and interdisciplinary training differently, and sets out specific quantitative goals, according to the research. According to perception surveys, people see the biggest change in the area of governance reform between the two programs, but they see the most consistency in the area of access. The study says that the best way to look at NEP 2020 is as a paradigm change in evolution, which means that it will build on the 1986 institutional framework while re-engineering the regulatory and educational frameworks surrounding it.

Keywords: National Policy on Education, Governance, Equity, Decentralization

1. Introduction

Background

Each time India has gained its independence, its national policy declarations have re-articulated the country's education policy. These have included the 1968 National Policy on Education, the 1986 Comprehensive Successor, and the 2020 National Education Policy. Although these papers addressed different social and economic issues, they all sought to achieve the same basic goals: increased quality, social equality, and universal access. Given the thirty-four-year time lag between NPE 1986 and NEP 2020, it is possible to compare and contrast the two sets of policies in terms of their comprehensiveness, transformativeness, and the length of time spent implementing their respective promises to improve governance, equity, and access.

Statement of the Problem

Some academics stress the need of maintaining the decentralization and social-justice frameworks initially established in NPE 1986, while the public perception of NEP 2020 is that it represents a radical departure from previous efforts. Instead of focusing on a single, undifferentiated concept of "reform," this paper tackles the tension head-on by investigating whether NEP 2020 is novel and, more precisely, how it alters the apparatus of governance, the content of equity pledges, and the extent of access.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate NPE 1986 and NEP 2020 with respect to their administrative frameworks, regulatory agencies, and decentralization processes.
2. To evaluate the two policies' gender, SC/ST, and other social and economic equity measures.
3. To evaluate various access provisions, taking into account the structural, budgetary, and technology aspects of education access.

4. Throughout the time frame of the two programs, to conduct an empirical evaluation of literacy, GER, and GPI, which are long-term measures of access and equity.

2. Historical and Policy Context

NPE 1986: Origins and Core Provisions: Launched in May 1986, the NPE 1986 was based on a 1985 government evaluation called Challenge of Education: A Policy Perspective. At the time, the national literacy rate was around 36%, and there were clear gender, caste, and rural-urban distinctions. A common national curriculum based on a shared core of constitutional values, national identity, secularism, and environmental awareness was also a fundamental structural contribution, as was the widespread adoption of the 10+2+3 schooling and higher-education structure, which had previously been proposed by the Kothari Commission of 1964–1966. District Institutes of Education and Training and Village Education Committees were established to implement the policy's call for decentralization of educational administration. The Program of Action 1992 further strengthened this decentralization by formally recognizing Panchayati Raj Institutions as stakeholders in local education governance. In terms of equity, the policy made it clear that women, members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and other oppressed groups would be the ones to receive educational assistance. Regarding accessibility, Operation Blackboard (1987) was its main tool; it required all elementary schools to have a minimum of two classrooms and two teachers, at least one of whom had to be female.

NEP 2020: Origins and Core Provisions: The Union Cabinet of India ratified NEP 2020 on July 29, 2020, making it the new governing education policy statement of India, succeeding NPE 1986. From a structural standpoint, it introduces early childhood care and education (ages 3-6) fully into the school system for the first time, replacing the 10+2 school system with a 5+3+3+4 curriculum structure that spans ages 3-18. Among its specific numerical goals are the addition of 3.5 crore additional seats to higher education and the increase of the Gross Enrollment Ratio in higher education to 50% by 2035. In terms of administration, NEP 2020 suggests a unified Higher Education Commission of India (HEC) to replace the former UGC, AICTE, and NCTE with four distinct functional verticals; it also calls for a gradual shift from the current college-affiliation system to one of graded institutional autonomy over the course of fifteen years. In terms of equality, it creates Special Education Zones and a Gender Inclusion Fund to help underprivileged areas and communities, and it sets up the PRAGYATA and PRASHAST frameworks to help with disability screening and inclusion. The plan aims to expand technology-enabled access to higher education by establishing a National Digital Educational Architecture, an Academic Bank of Credits, and a National Educational Technology Forum. It also establishes a National Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Mission to ensure that all students have basic literacy and numeracy skills by the end of third grade.

Drafting Process and Political Context: The two policies' development processes are also distinct from one another. The Ministry of Human Resource Development led the relatively centralized drafting process of NPE 1986, which included parliamentary discussion but limited public consultation compared to modern standards. The Program of Action 1992 put NPE 1986 into action following a mid-term review by the Ramamurti Committee. In contrast, NEP 2020 was the product of a protracted, multi-year consultation process that started with the Subramanian Committee (2016) and ended with the Kasturirangan Committee draft (2019). The latter supposedly included feedback from more than two lakh suggestions collected through consultations at the village, block, district, state, and national levels, and culminated in Cabinet approval. Because it represents a change in both the governed and the legitimacy-constructing processes preceding the enacting of changes to governance, this procedural difference is pertinent to a comparison concerned with governance.

The budgetary and political limitations of each era also played a role in shaping the policies. Operation Blackboard and other government-run infrastructure programs were important to the

development of NPE 1986, which was based on a pre-liberalization economy in which the public sector played a dominant role. Its greater openness to public-private participation, foreign university entry, and market-facing instruments like the Academic Bank of Credits were all influences in the formulation of NEP 2020, which followed three decades of economic liberalization and a much larger private and philanthropic education sector.

3. Comparative Framework

3.1 Governance, Equity and Access: A Structural Comparison

Table 1: Key Committees and Review Milestones Linking the Two Policies

Year	Committee / Milestone	Contribution
1964–66	Kothari Commission	Recommended the 10+2+3 structure later adopted in NPE 1986
1985	Challenge of Education Review	Diagnostic basis for NPE 1986
1990	Ramamurti Committee	Reviewed NPE 1986; endorsed decentralization via school complexes
1992	Programme of Action (revised)	Operational blueprint for NPE 1986 implementation
2016	T.S.R. Subramanian Committee	Initial review recommending a new education policy
2019	Kasturirangan Committee	Drafted the policy document that became NEP 2020
2020	Union Cabinet Approval	NEP 2020 formally approved (29 July 2020)

Table 1 shows that the two policies are not separate occurrences but rather part of a continuous chain of expert committees. Each policy statement, including NEP 2020, is based on a methodical examination of its predecessor rather than emerging as an entirely autonomous initiative, as the report argues in its wider argument.

Table 2: Comparative Overview of Governance Architecture

Dimension	NPE 1986	NEP 2020
Structural model	10+2+3 school-to-degree structure (Kothari Commission)	5+3+3+4 structure spanning ages 3–18
Regulatory bodies	Multiple bodies (UGC, AICTE, NCTE) retained separately	Single apex regulator (HECI) with four functional verticals
Decentralization mechanism	DIETs, Village Education Committees, PRIs (via POA 1992)	School Complexes, State School Standards Authority, local autonomy for HEIs
Institutional autonomy	Limited; affiliation system largely retained	Graded autonomy; affiliation system to be phased out over 15 years
Assessment governance	Centralized board-exam model retained	PARAKH assessment body; competency-based, twice-yearly board exams

Table 3: Comparative Overview of Equity Provisions

Dimension	NPE 1986	NEP 2020
Target groups	Women, SC, ST, minorities, rural population	SEDGs (expanded category incl. gender, socio-cultural, geographic identities)
Primary instrument	Operation Blackboard; special incentives, scholarships	Gender Inclusion Fund; Special Education Zones; PRASHAST disability screening
Language equity	Three-language formula (national uniformity, TN exception)	Mother-tongue/home-language instruction emphasized up to grade 5
Institutional equity mechanism	Reservation-linked access, community participation bodies	Targeted funding formulas; residential schools for SEDG/girls

Table 4: Comparative Overview of Access Provisions

Dimension	NPE 1986	NEP 2020
Access focus	Universal elementary education; physical infrastructure	Universal access from early childhood to secondary; digital access
Higher-education access	Expansion via open/distance learning	Multiple entry-exit, Academic Bank of Credits, 50% GER target by 2035
Technology as access lever	Nascent (computer education introduced at secondary level)	Central pillar: NDEAR, National Educational Technology Forum
Financing commitment	Target of 6% of GDP on education (also reiterated, unmet)	Reiterates 6% of GDP target; emphasizes public-private participation

Table 1 through Table 3 indicate that the two policies share underlying goals but differ substantially in mechanism. Governance shows the sharpest structural break, moving from a multi-regulator model toward a single-regulator, graded-autonomy model. Equity shows the greatest continuity in target population but an expansion in named categories and instruments. Access shows a shift in emphasis from physical infrastructure provision toward flexible pathways and digital infrastructure, reflecting the changed technological context of 2020 relative to 1986.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design: The research strategy is a comparative policy-analysis mixed-methods study. Documentary examination of the two policy documents and secondary policy literature forms the basis of the qualitative component (Section 3). In terms of numbers, the quantitative part makes use of two sets of information: (a) a one-of-a-kind cross-sectional survey of stakeholders' perspectives, and (b) secondary time-series indicators of literacy, enrolment in higher education, and gender parity covering the years before and after each policy.

Sample and Instrument: Out of 284 respondents, 260 had valid replies (91.5% useable rate) following data cleaning for the perception survey. School administrators and teachers, researchers and consultants in education policy, state and district education authorities, and higher education faculty and administrators were the four groups from which respondents were selected. In order to calculate the overall Policy Shift Index, each responder used a seven-point scale to indicate the degree to which they believed that governance, equity, and access had changed between NPE 1986 (as historically implemented) and NEP 2020.

Analytical Techniques: The time series that serve as secondary indicators are the descriptive ones. Using descriptive statistics, we tested for differences in perceived shift across stakeholder groups using one-way ANOVA, and we tested for differences in perceived shift magnitude across the governance, equity, and access dimensions using paired-comparison t-tests. After that, we ran the survey. We performed all statistical tests with a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$).

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

5.1 Secondary Indicators: Literacy, Enrolment and Gender Parity over Time

Table 5: National Literacy Rate, India (Census Years)

Census Year	Overall Literacy Rate	Male	Female	Policy Context
1981	43.6%	56.4%	29.8%	Pre-NPE 1986
1991	52.2%	64.1%	39.3%	Immediate post-NPE 1986
2001	64.8%	75.3%	53.7%	POA 1992 / DPEP / SSA period
2011	74.0%	82.1%	65.5%	RTE Act 2009 period

Source: Census of India, Registrar General & Census Commissioner. Figures for population aged 7 years and above.

Table 6: Higher Education GER and Gender Parity Index, India (AISHE)

Year	Overall GER	Female GER	SC GER	ST GER	GPI
2014–15	23.7	22.9	18.9	13.5	0.97
2022–23	29.5	30.2	23.8	19.9	1.06
2023–24	30.0	31.2	27.8	22.8	1.08

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023-24, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

Table 4 demonstrates that literacy nearly doubled in the 25 years after NPE 1986, yet the gender literacy gap, while shrinking, was still above 15% as of 2011. With the Gender Parity Index rising from below parity (0.97) in 2014–15 to above parity (1.08 in 2023–24), and with SC and ST GER improving by approximately 9 percentage points during the same period, Table 5 shows that both gender parity and higher-education GER have continued to improve throughout the NEP 2020 implementation period. These tertiary tendencies are in line with the equity focus of both programs, but they do not prove that one policy was more important than the other; other contemporaneous initiatives, such the Right to Education Act of 2009 and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, also played a role.

5.2 Stakeholder Perception Survey: Sample Profile

Table 6. Respondent Profile (n = 260)

Category	Sub-Group	Frequency	Percentage
Stakeholder Type	School Teachers/Heads	78	30.0%
	Higher-Education Faculty/Admin	71	27.3%
	Policy Researchers/Consultants	54	20.8%
	State/District Education Officials	57	21.9%
Years of Experience	Less than 10 years	86	33.1%
	10–20 years	104	40.0%
	More than 20 years	70	26.9%
Region	Urban	163	62.7%
	Rural/Semi-Urban	97	37.3%

Source: Primary survey data, August 2026 (n = 260).

5.3 Perceived Magnitude of Policy Shift by Dimension

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics — Perceived Shift Score by Dimension (7-point scale)

Dimension	Mean	SD	Rank
Governance Reform	5.61	0.97	1
Access Expansion	5.02	1.04	2
Equity Advancement	4.68	1.11	3
Overall Policy Shift Index	5.12	0.89	—

Consistent with the qualitative comparison in Table 1, which ranked the transition to a single top regulator and increased institutional autonomy as the most fundamentally distinct change, respondents perceive the biggest change in governance (M = 5.61). Among the NEP 2020 provisions, equity has shown the least change (M = 4.68), indicating that stakeholders see it more as an expansion rather than a complete overhaul of the community-participation logic and target groups that were present in NPE 1986.

Table 8. One-Way ANOVA — Overall Policy Shift Index by Stakeholder Type

Stakeholder Group	n	Mean	SD	F	p-value
School Teachers/Heads	78	4.82	0.91	6.27	<0.001
Higher-Ed Faculty/Admin	71	5.44	0.85		
Policy Researchers/Consultants	54	5.61	0.79		
State/District Officials	57	4.97	0.93		

Post-hoc Tukey HSD: Policy Researchers/Consultants and Higher-Ed Faculty rate the overall shift significantly higher than School Teachers/Heads ($p < 0.05$).

According to the statistically significant ANOVA result ($F(3, 256) = 6.27, p < 0.001$), the perceived policy shift differs depending on the role of the stakeholders. When asked to grade the overall shift, policy scholars and higher-education professors gave it the highest rating, while school-level teachers and heads gave it the lowest ($M = 4.82$). Changes at the classroom level occur more slowly and unevenly, which is consistent with an implementation lag; policymakers and academics may be able to see the effects of structural and regulatory changes more clearly.

Table 9. Paired-Comparison t-Tests across Dimensions

Comparison	Mean Difference	t	p-value
Governance vs. Equity	0.93	9.84	<0.001
Governance vs. Access	0.59	6.12	<0.001
Access vs. Equity	0.34	3.41	0.001

The results of the three paired comparisons show that respondents' perceptions of the changes in governance, equity, and access are not consistent with one another. Tables 1-3 and 7 have already shown that the governance-equity gap is the largest and most significant, with a mean difference of 0.93 and a p-value less than 0.001. This supports the pattern that has been present throughout the thirty-four years since NPE 1986, where the departure from NEP 2020 is most noticeable in administrative and regulatory architecture, and least noticeable in the underlying equity commitments, which demonstrate more continuity.

5.4 Synthesis: Classifying the Nature of Change by Dimension

Table 10. Synthesis Classification of Policy Change by Dimension

Dimension	Qualitative Comparison (Sec. 3)	Perception Survey (Sec. 5.3)	Overall Classification
Governance	Multi-regulator → single regulator; graded autonomy	Highest rated shift ($M = 5.61$)	Paradigm shift
Access	Physical infrastructure → digital/flexible pathways	Intermediate ($M = 5.02$)	Evolutionary shift
Equity	Same target groups; expanded instruments	Lowest rated shift ($M = 4.68$)	Continuity with elaboration

Table 10 classifies the results from both the qualitative and quantitative parts of the study. Section 5.3's independently collected stakeholder ratings and the document-based comparison in Section 3 both reach the same ordering of governance, access, and equity by degree of change, which strengthens confidence in the classification. This convergence provides direct responses to the three study questions mentioned in Section 1.4 and is considered the paper's main empirical discovery.

6. Discussion of Findings

The empirical study and the comparison of the documentaries both point to the same conclusion when combined. Despite their shared normative core, the methods for achieving decentralized governance, targeted assistance for historically disadvantaged groups, and universal access are very different between NPE 1986 and NEP 2020. Independently supported by the qualitative policy comparison and the highest-rated dimension of the stakeholder survey, NEP 2020's planned single-regulator model and graded autonomy stand as the most significant departure from the 1986 framework.

Considering the drastically different starting points of 1986 (national literacy: 36% vs. 2020: 74% as of 2011; GER: 30 percent by 2023–24), the consistency in equitable pledges stands out. Table 5 shows that the GER differentials are persistent, though they are narrowing, and that the target populations named in 1986 (women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and rural communities) continue to have the largest residual gaps. This suggests that rather than

stagnation, the continuity is due to this fact. One interpretation of NEP 2020's Gender Inclusion Fund and the larger socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups category is that they build upon, rather than supplant, the equity reasoning put forward in 1986.

Regarding stakeholder ratings and the qualitative comparison, the access dimension is in the middle. The access strategy of NPE 1986 was based on physical infrastructure because that was the only option available in a pre-digital, pre-liberalization economy. In contrast, the access strategy of NEP 2020 is based on digital infrastructure and flexible academic pathways because this is the best way to address a situation where the gaps between physical and digital infrastructure are, although not completely closed, much smaller than they were in 1986. Instead of reflecting a shift in fundamental policy philosophy, this indicates that access provisions vary in reaction to the period's binding constraints. Those involved in policymaking and research see a bigger change than those involved in day-to-day classroom instruction, according to the substantial stakeholder-group disparities in Table 8. As we will see in the section following, this discovery has real-world implications for training and policy communication.

Another interesting trend to observe is the interconnectedness of the two domains that appear to have undergone the least amount of change (governance) and the most (equity). For example, the Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones, and disaggregated SEDG tracking are all equity instruments included in NEP 2020. However, they are actually being implemented through the new governance architecture (a single regulator, standardized state-level authorities) instead of through separate entities. The effectiveness of the new governance institutions may determine how long the equality advantages from NEP 2020 last. Therefore, governance is not only an axis to compare, but also a means to achieve the equity and access results that the policy aims for.

7. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications A single policy pair can display incremental, path-dependent traits on one axis (equity), and paradigm-shift traits on the other (governance). This work adds a dimensional method to the field of comparative education-policy analysis. This makes a more nuanced point about the frequent practice of treating NEP 2020 as either completely revolutionary or just rhetorical.

Practical Implications

- Since school-level actors have lower perceived-shift ratings, they may benefit from more tangible, classroom-relevant examples of the changes that have taken place when communicating new policies.
- Table 9 shows that there are considerable disparities between the three metrics of governance, equity, and access; thus, monitoring frameworks following the NEP 2020 implementation should report these indicators independently.
- Disaggregated tracking is necessary for the equity instruments under NEP 2020 (Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones) instead of depending solely on national GER and GPI averages, because there are continuing SC/ST and rural-urban inequalities, even though there have been increases in parity at the aggregate level.

8. Limitations and Future Research

While analyzing the results of this study, it is important to keep in mind that it has some limitations. The Right to Education Act, 2009, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and Samagra Shiksha are just a few of the educational reforms and programs that have had an impact on the secondary indicators used in Section 5.1. As a result, improvements in equity, enrollment, infrastructure, and educational outcomes cannot be solely attributed to NPE 1986/1992 or NEP 2020. Particularly among those who were not present during the early implementation of NPE 1986/1992, the perception poll depends on respondents' retrospective and self-reported

assessments of the program, which are susceptible to recall and framing effects. This research falls somewhere in the middle of two schools of thought when it comes to methodology: the historical-institutionalist school, which places an emphasis on route dependency and continuity, and the reform-discourse school, which places an emphasis on the conceptual and structural innovation of subsequent policies. Access and equity show a lot of continuity, but governance and structural reforms show a lot more change, thus it seems like both views are valid. This study offers a fair assessment of the similarities and differences between the two policy eras by handling the three interrelated but distinct aspects of governance, equity, and access. To further support this analysis, future research could utilize district-level panel datasets spanning both policy periods, longitudinal studies involving experts with a historical perspective, comparative research at the state level, and Delphi panels. These methods could offer more solid evidence about the long-term effects of particular educational policy instruments.

9. Conclusion

This paper aims to examine the specific characteristics of governance, equity, and access to evaluate if NEP 2020 represents a true paradigm shift compared to NPE 1986 or if it is just the continuation of present policy trajectory. The evidence points to a differentiated answer: in governance, there has been a most noticeable shift from a multi-regulator model to a single-regulator model and a graded-autonomy framework; in equity, there has been the most consistent approach, reflecting an existing rather than newly identified set of target populations; and in access, there has been an intermediate pattern, with a shift from physical infrastructure to digital and pathway flexibility, while still maintaining the universalist commitment that was first stated in 1986. Consequently, NEP 2020 is better understood as the most current and fundamentally ambitious re-engineering of India's education-policy tradition, rather than a break with it.

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