

Education for All - National Educational Policies - An overview

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Abstract

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 marked a transformative step in India's educational reform, introducing inclusivity as a central principle in national development. Framed within the socio-political context of inequality and underdevelopment, the policy sought to universalize education and ensure equal access for marginalized groups, including individuals with disabilities. This report critically examines the NPE 1986 with a focus on its chapter on "Education of the Handicapped," evaluating the policy's structure, provisions, and implementation. It highlights the policy's paradigm shift from welfare-based to rights-oriented education, emphasizing integration, teacher training, curriculum reform, and infrastructural accessibility. Despite its progressive framework, the policy's implementation suffered from resource shortages, inadequate training, and uneven regional execution. The report also draws a comparative analysis between the NPE 1986 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, underscoring a clear evolution from conditional integration to comprehensive inclusion. Ultimately, the study concludes that the NPE 1986 laid the ideological and institutional foundation for contemporary inclusive education in India, influencing subsequent legislation and rights-based educational reforms.

Keywords: National Policy on Education (1986), Inclusive Education, Disability Rights, Educational Reform, Accessibility, Social Justice, National Education Policy (2020)

Introduction The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 marked a watershed moment in the evolution of India's educational landscape. Formulated in a socio-political climate characterized by growing awareness of social inequalities, regional disparities, and the

need for human resource development, the policy aimed to restructure the Indian education system in alignment with constitutional values of justice, equality, and fraternity. The NPE 1986, along with its subsequent Programme of Action (POA) 1992, sought to universalize elementary education, promote women's equality, integrate marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the physically handicapped into mainstream education, and strengthen the link between education and national development. The policy recognized that education was not merely a sectoral concern but a fundamental instrument for achieving social transformation. It emphasized the creation of a National System of Education designed to eliminate disparities and foster inclusiveness. One of its most notable aspects was its commitment to the education of the handicapped—a term then used to refer to children with physical or mental disabilities. This inclusion represented a progressive shift in policy discourse, placing disability within the broader framework of equality and social justice.

The inclusion of “Education of the Handicapped” as a distinct chapter within the NPE 1986 and its Programme of Action

underlined the government's acknowledgment of the right to education for all children, regardless of physical or intellectual ability. It was a precursor to later constitutional and legislative developments, such as the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), the Right to Education Act (2009), and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016).

This essay critically examines the inclusivity of NPE 1986, with particular emphasis on its approach to the education of children with disabilities. It explores the structure, provisions, and implementation strategies under the policy, assesses their effectiveness, and concludes by comparing these frameworks to the National Education Policy 2020, thereby identifying the continuities and advancements that form the way forward for inclusive education in India.

Historical Context and Rationale for NPE 1986

India's post-independence education policies have significantly evolved through a series of reforms aimed at democratizing access to learning opportunities for all citizens. The Education Commission, which operated from 1964 to 1966 under the leadership of D.S. Kothari, made important recommendations such as the establishment of a Common School

System designed to reduce educational inequality across various social strata (India, National Policy on Education 1986, 1986). However, despite these well-intentioned proposals, the actual implementation of such a system remained only partially successful, leaving many disparities unaddressed.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) introduced in 1968 laid the groundwork for a more unified educational structure. Nevertheless, it fell short of adequately addressing the unique needs of marginalized groups, including the diverse populations of learners with disabilities. As the 1980s approached, India was grappling with significant challenges in its educational landscape—high levels of illiteracy, alarming dropout rates, persistent gender disparities, and the marginalization of children with disabilities from mainstream educational settings.

The 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons, along with a growing global focus on the principle of “Education for All,” began to shape a new direction for educational policy in India. Policymakers increasingly recognized that education was not only a fundamental right but also a critical instrument for achieving national integration and fostering

social equity. This shift culminated in the National Policy on Education of 1986, which emerged as a comprehensive framework aimed at addressing these existing disparities and strengthening the entire education system, encompassing all levels from early childhood education to higher education.

The introduction of this policy, elaborated in the Programme of Action published in 1992, highlighted the urgent need to eliminate disparities in both access to and the quality of education, to enhance public educational services, and to integrate marginalized populations—including individuals with physical and mental disabilities—into the national educational framework (India, Programme of Action under the National Policy on Education 1986, 1992). At the core of this policy was the guiding philosophy that inclusive education is vital for realizing the democratic and socialist ideals that are enshrined in the Indian Constitution, ultimately contributing to a more equitable society where every individual has the opportunity to learn and thrive.

Structure and Vision of the National Policy on Education 1986

The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 was intricately designed around the

overarching concept of establishing a National System of Education. This system was intended to guarantee not only equality of access but also equitable outcomes in the educational landscape. The policy meticulously identified several priority areas that demanded focused attention. These included Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), the Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE), Education for Women's Equality, Education for Scheduled Castes (SC)/Scheduled Tribes (ST), Minorities, and Individuals with Disabilities, alongside enhancements in Vocational and Higher Education and the reform of Teacher Training and Curriculum Development.

Inclusivity was a fundamental principle embedded within these various components of the policy. For instance, the ECCE programs were specifically aimed at providing early stimulation and pre-school education to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that they developed a strong foundation for future learning. Similarly, the UEE initiative strategically targeted universal access to education, focused on improving retention rates as well as enhancing the overall quality of education offered.

Moreover, while the education of individuals with disabilities was addressed as a distinct section within the broader framework, it was essential to recognize that this aspect was seamlessly integrated into the policy's more comprehensive objectives. This integration showcased a profound understanding that the ethos of inclusion must commence from the earliest stages of a child's educational journey, thereby laying the groundwork for a more equitable society. Ultimately, the NPE 1986 aimed to cultivate an educational environment that not only acknowledged diversity but actively embraced it across all levels and spheres of learning.

Education for Disabled: Vision and Objectives

The NPE 1986 was the first national policy in India to explicitly acknowledge the educational rights of children with disabilities as an essential part of the national education framework. It declared that "the education for disabled will be an integral part of the education system." This statement marked a significant departure from previous welfare-oriented approaches that viewed disability primarily as a matter of charity, rather than recognizing it as a fundamental human right. The policy outlined two major goals: first, the

integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education wherever feasible, achieved through inclusive schools and supportive services that cater to diverse learning needs; and second, the development of special schools that are properly equipped and staffed to accommodate children with severe disabilities who could not be immediately integrated into regular classrooms.

The underlying philosophy of the NPE 1986 was rooted in the belief that all children deserve equal opportunities for growth and development, and it aimed to promote a sense of equality and participation among students. By ensuring that disability does not become a barrier to self-development or social inclusion, the policy sought to foster an environment where children with disabilities could thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This shift towards recognizing the rights of disabled children not only aimed to enhance their educational experiences but also to contribute to a more inclusive society that values every individual's potential. In this way, the NPE 1986 laid the groundwork for subsequent reforms in educational policy, pushing for broader awareness and acceptance of the diverse needs within the student population.

Institutional and Structural Framework

To operationalize this vision, the policy proposed several significant structural interventions. One key initiative was the establishment of District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), which aimed to incorporate essential modules on special education into teacher training programs. This development was intended to better equip educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to support students with diverse learning needs.

In addition, the policy emphasized the importance of collaboration between education and social welfare departments to ensure coordinated service delivery, thereby creating a more comprehensive support system for students with disabilities. Strengthening the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) schemes through enhanced central and state funding was also a crucial component of the strategy, designed to provide more resources and support for inclusive educational practices.

Furthermore, the development of curriculum materials and teaching aids specifically tailored to accommodate a wide range of disabilities was prioritized, ensuring that educational content was accessible and

relevant to all students. These measures collectively aimed to shift the educational paradigm from a model of segregation to one of integration, fostering an inclusive environment for learners. However, it is important to note that the transition towards integration was gradual and varied significantly across different states, often influenced by local policies, resources, and community engagement.

Key Components of Inclusive Education under NPE 1986

Curriculum Reform and Pedagogical Adaptation

NPE 1986 emphasized the need for child-centered and activity-based learning, which implicitly supported inclusivity in education. This approach recognized that every child is unique and learns best when engaged in meaningful activities that relate to their interests and experiences. The Programme of Action in 1992 further advanced this vision by proposing the development of adaptive curricula and individualized learning strategies designed to accommodate students with varied abilities. These strategies aimed to ensure that all learners, regardless of their strengths and challenges, could thrive in an educational environment tailored to their needs. In this

context, teachers were expected to adopt flexible methodologies that prioritize essential life skills, sensory development, and functional literacy over traditional rote memorization techniques. This shift encouraged educators to create learning experiences that foster critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills, equipping students not only for academic success but also for everyday life. By focusing on holistic development, the educational framework aimed to create inclusive classrooms where every child could participate meaningfully and reach their full potential.

Teacher Training and Sensitization

Recognizing that inclusive education begins with well-trained and empathetic teachers, the policy emphasized the necessity of integrating special education modules into teacher training institutions. Consequently, the District Institute of Education and Training (DIETs), the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs), and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) were entrusted with the critical responsibility of developing specialized training materials. Despite these efforts, the implementation of such initiatives encountered significant challenges. These included inadequate human resources, which made it

difficult to support the extensive training required, as well as limited awareness among educators about the importance of inclusive practices. Additionally, the absence of a robust monitoring framework hindered the effectiveness of the training programs, leaving many teachers without the guidance necessary to successfully adopt inclusive teaching strategies. Addressing these obstacles is crucial to ensure that the commitment to inclusive education translates into real progress in classrooms, ultimately benefiting all students.

Physical Infrastructure and Accessibility

The Programme of Action from 1992 placed significant emphasis on the importance of physical accessibility in educational settings. It highlighted the need for architectural features such as ramps and barrier-free classrooms, alongside the incorporation of assistive technologies designed to support students with disabilities. These provisions were indeed revolutionary for their time, pushing the conversation around inclusivity forward. However, despite their progressive intentions, the practical implementation of these ideas faced considerable challenges. Many rural and underfunded schools struggled to make the necessary changes, often due to limited

resources and funding. Consequently, while the Programme of Action was a crucial step toward inclusive education, its impact was hindered by existing inequalities in the educational system, underscoring the need for ongoing commitment and investment to ensure all students can benefit from accessible learning environments.

Financial Assistance and Community Involvement

The policy recognized that the education of individuals with disabilities necessitated both institutional support and active participation from the community. It advocated for several key initiatives, including the provision of financial assistance to voluntary organizations that were dedicated to delivering quality special education services. Additionally, it emphasized the importance of parental involvement in local education committees, ensuring that families had a say in the educational processes affecting their children. The proposal also called for the development of resource centers and hostels specifically designed to accommodate students with disabilities, thereby providing them with the necessary support and environment for learning. These initiatives were aimed at fostering greater social integration and

enhancing local accountability, ultimately striving to create a more inclusive educational landscape that could better meet the diverse needs of all students. By bringing together various stakeholders, the policy sought to build a collaborative framework that recognizes the valuable contributions of each member of society in supporting the education of disabled individuals.

Evaluation of Implementation: Successes and Shortcomings

While the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 introduced a visionary and comprehensive framework for promoting inclusive education, its success varied widely across different regions and levels of the educational system. One of the key achievements of this policy was the formal recognition of the rights of children with disabilities within the national education framework, marking a significant shift in how these rights were perceived and addressed. This policy provided, for the first time, a structured approach that acknowledged the necessity of inclusive practices in schooling. In terms of programmatic expansion, the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme was implemented and expanded to several states, laying the essential

groundwork for creating inclusive education programs within mainstream schools. This expansion helped to integrate students with disabilities into the general education system, fostering an environment of diversity and acceptance. Moreover, the establishment of key institutional bodies such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) played a crucial role in guiding teacher training by incorporating special education modules and preparing educators to address the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities. This shift in teacher preparation aimed at equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to create a more inclusive classroom environment. Additionally, the policy contributed to awareness generation that transformed the discourse surrounding disability from a perspective of charity to one centered on rights. This paradigm shift paved the way for subsequent legislation aimed at furthering the rights and education of children with disabilities.

However, despite these achievements, the NPE 1986 faced significant limitations in its implementation. There remained a pronounced

implementation gap, as the ambitious goals outlined in the policy were not uniformly achieved. The absence of trained personnel, insufficient resources, and a lack of effective interdepartmental coordination impeded the progress expected from such a forward-thinking policy (Prianka Rao, 2020).

Another challenge was the limited inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools. A substantial number of children continued to depend on segregated special schools rather than experiencing the benefits of integrated classrooms, which could provide a more inclusive educational experience. Furthermore, the preparation of teachers was found to be inadequate, as many training institutions did not provide sufficient emphasis on disability-inclusive pedagogy, leaving teachers ill-equipped to handle diverse learning needs.

The urban-rural divide further exacerbated these issues, with most of the benefits of the policy being concentrated in urban centers. This left many rural and tribal regions underserved, preventing equitable access to inclusive education for all children across the country. Thus, while the NPE 1986 was conceptually framed to promote inclusion and equality, its practical realization fell short of achieving the egalitarian ideals it aimed to

uphold, highlighting the need for continued efforts and commitment to overcome these challenges in the future.

Was the NPE 1986 Truly Inclusive? A Critical Analysis

Inclusivity in education extends beyond mere access; it encompasses participation, equity, and empowerment in various dimensions. By this measure, the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 was progressive in its vision but limited in its execution. The policy did commendably highlight the need to address the needs of marginalized groups, including women, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities, minorities, and individuals with disabilities. However, the framing of disability within a medical model often reinforced a sense of segregation rather than fostering genuine inclusion. The language of “integration where feasible” suggested a conditional approach to inclusion, implying that mainstream education was primarily reserved for those with only “mild” disabilities. This approach reflected a transitional mindset—making strides toward inclusion but not yet fully embracing its potential in a holistic manner (Prianka Rao, 2020).

Furthermore, realizing true inclusivity required systemic reforms in several critical areas, including teacher training, curriculum design, and educational infrastructure, which were not fully addressed. While the Programme of Action associated with the NPE did call for community involvement in shaping educational practices, it fell short of establishing enforceable accountability mechanisms that could genuinely drive change. The lack of legal obligations, such as those introduced later with the Right to Education Act of 2009, meant that the goal of inclusion remained largely aspirational rather than enforceable.

Nonetheless, the policy's emphasis on equality and the concept of common schooling laid a vital ideological foundation for future reforms in education. It acted, in essence, as a bridge connecting the welfare-based approaches of the past with the rights-based frameworks that would emerge in the future. This groundwork has continued to influence discussions on inclusivity and equity in education, inspiring further developments that seek to fulfill the promise of a truly inclusive system for all learners, regardless of their background or abilities (Prianka Rao, 2020).

Broader Dimensions of Inclusivity: Intersectionality and Access

Inclusivity in NPE 1986 was not limited to disability—it intersected with gender, caste, class, and geography. The policy's sections on Education for Women's Equality, Education of SC/ST and Other Backward Sections, and Minority Education collectively contributed to an integrated vision of social justice.

For disabled children belonging to marginalized castes or rural regions, the challenges were compounded. The policy's focus on Operation Blackboard (improving infrastructure and teaching materials) and District Boards of Education sought to address these intersectional inequalities, though their reach remained uneven.

By emphasizing community participation and local accountability, the NPE 1986 recognized that inclusivity cannot be imposed from above—it must grow from within the social fabric. However, without sufficient monitoring and sustained funding, these mechanisms struggled to achieve long-term transformation.

The Legacy of NPE 1986 and the Transition to Rights-Based Education

Despite its limitations, the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 created an enduring legacy that continues to resonate throughout

the country. This pivotal policy shaped India's educational philosophy for nearly three decades, serving as a cornerstone that influenced legislation, prompted institutional reforms, and spurred pedagogical innovation across various levels of the education system. Key outcomes of the NPE included the establishment of the Persons with Disabilities Act in 1995, which legally mandated the provision of equal opportunities in education and employment for individuals with disabilities. This landmark legislation represented a significant shift towards inclusivity and accessibility in education. Additionally, the policy facilitated the expansion of inclusive education programs through various centrally sponsored schemes, making education more accessible to diverse groups of learners.

There was also a noticeable growth in the integration of special education within teacher training curricula, ensuring that future educators are better prepared to address the needs of all students, regardless of their varied backgrounds and abilities. Further reinforcing the importance of education, the recognition of education as a fundamental right came through the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002, followed by the implementation of the Right to

Education Act in 2009. These developments have solidified the commitment to providing quality education for every child in India.

In this sense, the NPE 1986 can be regarded as the intellectual and moral precursor to India's contemporary rights-based educational framework, laying the groundwork for ongoing conversations and reforms aimed at further enhancing the educational landscape in the country. The influence of this policy is evident not only in the legislative advancements that followed but also in the societal shifts towards appreciating the value of inclusive and equitable education for all.

Conclusion

The National Policy on Education of 1986 was a significant milestone in India's ongoing quest for educational equality. It prominently brought issues of inclusivity and special education to the forefront of national discourse, effectively laying the groundwork for subsequent reforms in the education sector. Although its implementation was often hindered by various structural, financial, and attitudinal constraints, it sparked a transformative dialogue about the right of every child—regardless of ability—to learn and engage fully in society.

A critical aspect of this policy's contribution lies not only in what it accomplished at the time but also in its visionary ideals. By acknowledging the education of individuals with disabilities as an essential component of the broader education system, it challenged deeply rooted notions of exclusion that had long been a part of the educational landscape. It set in motion a process that would, over the decades that followed, gradually evolve into a rights-based framework, culminating in the National Education Policy of 2020.

The comparison between the National Policy on Education of 1986 and the National Education Policy of 2020 illustrates a remarkable journey from a focus on access to a more profound objective of empowerment. This evolution represents a significant transition from policy intention to actual policy realization. The NEP 2020 builds upon the foundational spirit of 1986 while advancing it into a new era characterized by holistic, inclusive, and technology-driven approaches to education. It envisions a learning environment in which diversity is not just acknowledged but celebrated, ensuring that every learner—whether disabled or otherwise—can reach their fullest potential (Mohanty, 2023).

In conclusion, the NPE 1986 should be recognized as the ideological foundation for inclusive education in India. Its principles continue to resonate, inspiring contemporary educational reforms and serving as a powerful reminder to policymakers that genuine progress can only be achieved through the embrace of diversity. This commitment to inclusivity stands as a testament to the strength and resilience of a democratic nation, reinforcing the idea that a truly equitable education system reflects the varied needs and aspirations of all its citizens.

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