



Evaluating School Education Reforms in India: NEP 2020 through the Lens of NITI Aayog's 2026 Policy Roadmap

Dr. Poonam Dhull, Associate Professor, R.L.S College of Education, Sidhrawali

Prof. Indira Dhull, Former Head and Dean, Faculty of Education, M.D. University

Rohtak, Presently Director, KIIT College of Education, Gurugram

Abstract

The National Education Policy (2020) represents a paradigm shift in the education landscape of India. The policy aims at creating inclusive, equitable institutions that can foster future-ready individuals. Five years post adoption, its implementation at ground level needs to be evaluated to identify the rate of progress and gaps. To understand the implementation across key recommendations, the study draws on secondary data from NITI Aayog (2026) and UDISE+ (2024–25) through descriptive and analytical review. The study is focused on the implementation rate of six key recommendations: access, enrollment, retention & transition, dropout, infrastructure, and inclusivity. The review sheds light on the commendable achievement in terms of access, enrollment, and improved infrastructure. However, dropout rates, less transition, and access to minority classes are still an issue. The policy has managed to bring out positive changes in our education system; however, the implementation gaps must be addressed to realize the full potential.

Keywords: NEP 2020, NITI Aayog 2026, UDISE+, School Education, Access, Infrastructure, Equity.

Introduction

Education has always been the foundation for a civilized society. In a diverse and developing nation like India, it serves as the primary instrument for achieving social equity, economic development, and national unity. Recognizing this, India has continuously reformed its education system by introducing reforms such as the Kothari Commission (1964-66) to the Right to Education Act (2009). The Government of India has strived to expand access to early education and improve its quality. Building on these reforms and education policies, the emergence of the National Education Policy 2020 marks the most comprehensive restructuring of the education system.

Aligned with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, it aims to build an equal, inclusive, and future-ready education system that is rooted in Indian values yet responsive to 21st-century demands. Five years since its adoption, the NITI Aayog (2026) has assessed the ground-level progress of these reforms across key indicators of access, enrollment, retention, infrastructure, and equity. This paper draws on the NITI Aayog (2026) report and UDISE+ (2024–25) data to evaluate the implementation status of NEP 2020's school education reforms, identify persistent gaps, and reflect on the road ahead.

Historical Context

In ancient India, education was considered a foundation for individual and societal growth. At that time, education focused on training of the intellect and behavior development. Fostering morality, ethics, and spiritual insight was also a major part of education. The purpose of knowledge was to become a reliable individual and sail through life with compassion, fairness, and a sense of responsibility towards society. As India moved towards the colonial era, this indigenous and holistic approach was erased. During that period, the curriculum was restructured so that people could serve the administrative goals. Later, the post-colonial era brought challenges such as lack of infrastructure, loss of Indian knowledge, and poor quality of teachers. To mitigate this challenge, the Indian Constitution made elementary education free and universal (Article 15). To further strengthen this, the Mudalir Commission (1952) advocated using the mother tongue for instruction, introduced vocational education, and improved teacher training.

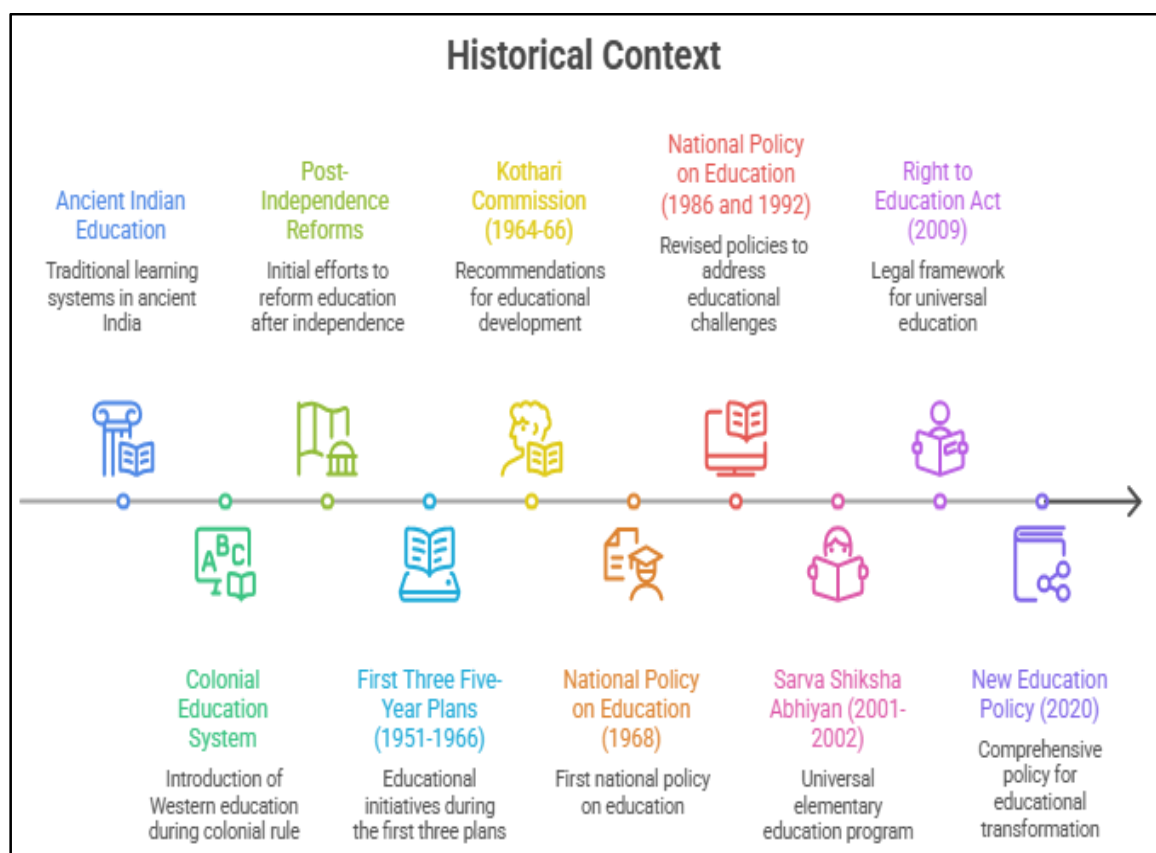


Fig. 1: Evolution of School Education in India

Building on the momentum, the first three five-year plans (1951-1966) focused on expanding education by prioritizing universal education, teacher training, adult literacy, and engineering colleges. These plans paved the way for the Kothari Commission (1964-66). India's first comprehensive policy on education was given in 1968, which marked a significant step towards a structured education system. Free education up to 14 years, the three-language formula, and investment in science and vocational education were some of the recommendations proposed by NEP, 1968. With a stronger emphasis on access, equity, and quality, the National Policy on Education 1986 (later amended in 1992) reaffirmed these principles. It focused on school infrastructure, attempted to universalize elementary education, and implemented "Operation Blackboard" with the objective of arming elementary schools with basic facilities.

As India entered the new millennium, the goals of education shifted towards universalization of education. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001-02) focused on providing elementary education to students up to 14 years old and reducing dropout rates. Furthermore, the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) made education a legal right. While these reforms significantly expanded access and brought greater consistency to the system, they also revealed a deeper challenge. These changes increased access and improved system consistency, but they also exposed a more serious flaw: learning quality. NEP 2020 was made possible by the realization that it was still difficult to ensure that every learner had a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and social and ethical development.

Key Pillars of NEP Recommendations for Schools

The National Education Policy (2020) has outlined a comprehensive framework for transforming school education in India. It is based on five major pillars: universal access, equitable and inclusive education, quality learning outcomes, effective governance, and teacher empowerment.

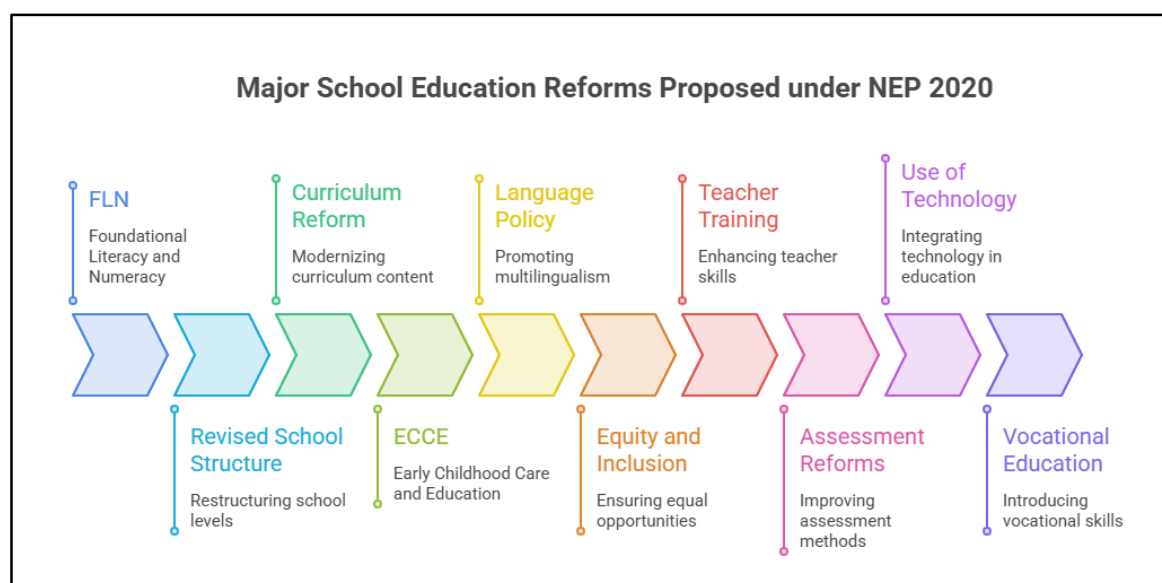


Fig. 2: NEP 2020 Recommendations for School Education

Over the past five years, NEP 2020 has brought about significant changes to the school education system. In terms of implementation, initiatives such as NIPUN Bharat, Vidya Pravesh, DIKSHA, ECCE-focused teacher training, and toy-based pedagogy were effective in promoting early education, school readiness, and quality learning (National Education Policy Implementation, 2022). The National Curriculum Framework (2022)

focused on improving early education by improving the curriculum and adopting play-based learning. Furthermore, teacher training has been strengthened by continuous training through NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads’ and Teachers’ Holistic Advancement) and digital learning by DIKSHA. The creation of PARAKH marks a shift towards competency-based assessment. While these initiatives reflect meaningful policy momentum, the following section examines the ground-level reality of these reforms through key indicators drawn from UDISE+ and NITI Aayog (2026).

Implementation Status of Major School Education Reforms under NEP 2020

The recommendations proposed by NEP 2020 helped in expanding the school education system of India. As per the UDISE+ Report (2024-25), India has emerged as an education leader in the world with more than 14.71 lakh schools and 24.69 crore students. Some of the implementation has been discussed below:

1. Universal Access

NEP recommends universal access to quality early education across the country (Para. 1.4). According to the NITI Aayog (2026), there are several constraints in its realization on the ground level. Only 50% of schools in India offer primary education (grades 1-5), and only 5.4% of schools provide continuous schooling from grade 1 to 12. The data exposes a deeply fragmented school structure with limited vertical expansion. This structural gap forces students to transition between different institutions. This results in higher dropout rates and hinders the growth of students. To achieve the vision of NEP, it is important to remove these challenges and ensure equitable access.

2. Ensuring Enrollment

Another key objective of NEP is enrollment and regular attendance across all levels of school education. It emphasizes continuous educational progression from foundational to higher stages (Para. 3.1).

Table 1: Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) Across School Levels in India
(2014-15 to 2024-25).
Source: UDISE+ Reports (2024–25)

School Level	GER (2024-25)	Trend Summary
Primary	90.9%	Decline after 2021-22
Upper Primary	90.3%	Stable Participation
Secondary	78.7%	Marginal Improvement
Higher Secondary	58.4%	Gradual Increase, Still low

The data suggests that the objective of access to elementary education has been largely achieved. However, a significant proportion of learners were not able to sustain participation beyond elementary level. As highlighted in the NITI Aayog (2026) report, despite improved access, challenges in transition and retention persist. The decline is especially beyond the primary stage, which requires stronger support for continuity and progression in schooling.

3. Retention and Smooth Transition across Educational Stages

Para 3.4 of NEP focuses on retaining the students with quality education, contextualized teaching, and support for disadvantaged groups.

Table 2: Transition Rates Across School Levels in India (2024-25).

Source: UDISE+ 2024-25

Transition Stage (Grades)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Total
Primary - Upper Primary	91.5	93.0	92.2
Upper Primary - Secondary	85.9	87.3	86.6
Secondary - Higher Secondary	72.4	77.9	75.11

The transition between stages, such as from primary to upper primary, has reached near-complete participation. However, the participation rate drops at higher stages. Additionally, girl students were noticed to have slightly higher transition rates than boys across all stages. Financial limitations, early workforce entry, and persistent social barriers could all be contributing factors to this decline. These results highlight the necessity of ongoing governmental intervention to improve retention strategies and guarantee fair advancement at all educational levels.

4. Dropout Patterns

One of NEP 2020's top priorities is ensuring retention and lowering school dropout rates. The policy places a strong emphasis on continuous education and ongoing participation across all educational phases. At the primary level, dropout rates are still low (0.3%), indicating high retention during the foundational years. But at the upper primary stage, the rate jumps to 3.5%, signifying the start of student disengagement. The dropout rates dramatically increase to 11.5% at the secondary level and present a serious issue.

The results show a distinct pattern of rising loss as students advance to more advanced educational levels. Enhancing secondary school retention is still a major challenge that calls for focused initiatives. Identifying socioeconomic pressures, household responsibility, loss of interest in academics, and limited pathways for education are some of the reasons for dropouts.

5. Infrastructure

As a fundamental need for safe and inclusive education, NEP 2020 highlights the necessity of sufficient school infrastructure, including classrooms, electricity, safe drinking water, ICT facilities, and operational restrooms (Para. 3.2). To create a fair and stimulating learning environment for every child, it is essential to ensure such infrastructure at every level, from pre-primary to higher secondary.

Table 3: Status of School Infrastructure in India (2014–15 to 2024–25)*Source: UDISE+ 2024–25*

Infrastructure Indicator	2014-15	2024-25	Gap Remaining
Functional Electricity	55.96%	91.9%	7% unelectrified
Functional Boys' Toilets	80%	92.4%	8% lacking
Functional Girls' Toilets	85.17%	94%	6% lacking
Functional Computers	26.42%	64.7%	35% without computers
Functional Internet Connectivity	-	63.5%	36% without internet
Smart Classrooms	14.9% (2021-22)	30.6%	70% without smart classrooms

The data reflects a strong initiation towards improving the infrastructure in terms of electricity, internet, washrooms, and the use of ICT in schools. The overall result shows meaningful implementation of NEP on the ground level. Only 7% of schools remain unelectrified and need to be fulfilled to support digital and technology-enabled learning. In terms of personal facilities, the proportion of boys' washrooms has improved since 2014-15 and has since remained consistently above 90%. Even now there is scope for improvement, as 1 in every 12 schools still lacks this basic facility. On the other hand, the facilities for girl students also expanded considerably to 94% in 2024-25. This stable improvement reflects the implementation of gender-specific infrastructure programs such as Swachh Vidyalaya Abhiyan and Samagra Shiksha. With 1 school in every 15 lacking washrooms for girls, there is still scope for improvement.

Significant progress has been made in integrating ICT into classrooms, as seen by the increase in computer use in schools. Targeted digital initiatives and enhanced budgetary assistance under Samagra Shiksha and NEP 2020 have contributed to this progress. But with over 35% of schools still without working computers, the digital gap is still a serious issue that requires fair funding in all areas. However, one-third of schools are still operating without internet, which affects the investments made in ICT. The use of digital teaching and learning devices such as smart classrooms has accelerated in past years. The growth is significant since 2021-22, but still nearly 7 out of 20 schools lack smart classrooms. Even if overall infrastructure growth is positive, there are gaps that must be addressed in order to convert physical infrastructure into significant learning outcomes.

6. Equity and Inclusion

One of NEP 2020's key goals is to guarantee that all children, regardless of gender, caste, locality, or ability have equal access to education (Para. 6). The enrollment trends for children with special needs are examined in the following data compiled from UDISE+ (2024–2025) in order to evaluate the realistic achievement of this objective.

A. Enrollment by Gender

Educating girls is central to achieving inclusion and women empowerment. The data of enrollment of girl students at various levels of school stages is given below.

Table 4: Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of Girls Across School Levels in India (2014–15 to 2024-25)

Source: UDISE+ 2024–25

School Level	GER 2014-15	GER 2024-25	Trend
Primary	107.38%	92.3%	Decline
Upper Primary	89.98%	92.5%	Modest Improvement
Secondary	75.5%	80.2%	Gradual Improvement
Higher Secondary	45.99%	60.9%	Steady Improvement

A significant improvement is seen in the enrollment and transition of girl students from the upper primary level to the higher secondary level. However, a smaller number of students have enrolled in the primary level. The decline may be due to household responsibilities, early marriage, and financial burden. Addressing these issues is important to ensure maximum reach of girl students from early to higher education.

B. Enrollment by Caste

The reduction of enrollment for SC and ST students in 2024-25 does not signify loss of access, but it may be a result of accurate enrollment recordkeeping. However, lower attendance at the higher secondary level indicates that many students from marginalized groups still find it difficult to finish their education, highlighting the need for more robust and focused support.

Table 5: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by Social Category Across School Levels (2014-15 to 2024-25)

Source: UDISE+ 2024–25

School Level	SC 2014-15	SC 2024-25	ST 2014-15	ST 2024-25
Primary	121.3%	92.7%	113.77%	98.8%
Upper Primary	98.9%	96.1%	89.97%	99.5%
Secondary	81.89%	82%	72.1%	81.3%
Higher Secondary	48.29%	59.4%	34.07%	51.9%

C. Children with Special Needs

Table 6: Infrastructure for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) in Indian Schools (2014–15 to 2024–25)

Source: UDISE+ 2024–25

Indicator	Base Year	Base Year %	2024–25	Improvement
CWSN-Friendly Toilets	2018–19	16.64%	33.4%	More than two-fold increase
Availability of Ramps	2014–15	59.77%	79.1%	Steady Improvement

A fundamental component of inclusive education is ensuring kids with special needs may access and navigate around school buildings. Over the past ten years, there has been an improvement in the availability of CWSN-friendly restrooms and ramps, although accessibility is still far from sufficient. Significant physical barriers still prevent students with special needs from participating in mainstream education.

The data reflects a significant improvement across all levels in terms of enrollment, transition, infrastructure, and equity. However, significant gaps still persist and demand targeted interventions. Such specific measures have gained success in gender parity and basic infrastructure; challenges such as the digital divide, rising dropout rates, and inadequate inclusive facilities remain unresolved.

Conclusion

The findings of the paper reflect a school system that is in transition. The data of the year 2024-25 reveals significant progress across 6 major areas as put forward by NEP 2020. The findings reveal that positive progress has been made in expanding foundational access and infrastructure and enrolling minorities at the secondary level. On the other hand, dropout rates are still high, and transition rates beyond the elementary stage are concerning. Furthermore, digital infrastructure is lacking, which halts the movement towards Viksit Bharat. The policy has provided a strong directional framework and implementation guidelines. But the proper implementation can only be done with honest commitment, administrative awareness, and a genuine sense of responsibility towards every child that the system is meant to serve.

References

- **Dhull, P. & Dhull, I. (2026).** Critical Analysis of NEP 2020 in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Opportunities and Implementation Gaps. *The Stanford Journal*, 3(2), 93-102.
- **Dhull, P. & Dhull, I. (2026).** Early Childhood Education Reforms under NEP 2020: A PRISMA-Guided Thematic Synthesis of Indian Research. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Research*, 16(1).
- **Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020).** *National education policy 2020*. Government of India.
- **National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2022).** *National curriculum framework for the foundational stage 2022*. NCERT.
- **National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) (2025).** *Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Report 2024–25*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- **NITI Aayog (2026).** *Strengthening School Education in India: Temporal Analysis and Policy Roadmap for Quality Enhancement*. Government of India.