

NEP 2020 and the Reorientation of Educational Epistemology in India: Change, Continuity and Possibility

Bharat Choudhary

PhD Scholar

Department of English, University of Delhi

Abstract: The NEP 2020 is a response to the long standing structural and philosophical limitations in Indian education system due to the country's colonial past. India got independence in 1947 but the education system continued practicing the education model that was found and established by the colonial regime. The colonial education model had focused on rote learning, disciplinary compartmentalization and English-centric knowledge systems. The framework served to the imperial governance but failed in making a connection with India's indigenous intellectual traditions, social realities and multilingual cultural landscape which limited its relevance for the Indian learners. This paper intends to portray NEP 2020 more than a reform, an epistemic and ideological shift aiming decolonization of Indian education. The policy foregrounds Indian Knowledge Systems, promotion of multilingualism and learning in mother-tongue. It has emphasized on holistic and multidisciplinary learning and moving away from exam-centric pedagogy. This paper examines how policy's primary concern is to focus on the needs of Indian learners by fostering contextual relevance, conceptual understanding and inclusivity. It also spread the light on how NEP 2020 democratize access to education, reduce epistemic hierarchies and promotes for a equitable and flexible learning environment.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Indian Education System, Indian Knowledge Systems, Decolonization, Multidisciplinary Education, Student Centric Learning.

Introduction

The role of education is not merely to produce skilled individuals but it also establishes subjects shaped by particular regimes of knowledge. Every

education system carries within it a theory of what is counted as legitimate knowledge. Where it is already decided whether which tradition deserve preservation and the forms of reasoning those are to be cultivated. Following this, one can say that education is fundamentally epistemological. For a society to understand itself, education helps in structuring the perception. It establishes the hierarchies of value and determines the intellectual vocabulary.

The modern education system in India was planned and implemented by the colonial governance with their ulterior motives. One cannot separate the epistemic foundations of contemporary schooling and higher education from the 19th Century British policy decisions. Most notably, Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) played the significant part. He had advocated for the English medium teaching and European curricula, which institutionalized a hierarchy that privileged Western Knowledge systems and completely ignored the indigenous intellectual traditions. The country got the freedom from political colonialism in 1947 but the epistemic scaffolding of colonial education remained largely intact.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been developed not merely as administrative reform but as a rearticulation of India's educational philosophy. It attempts to recalibrate the intellectual orientation of Indian education by promoting Indian knowledge systems, multilingual instruction, holistic pedagogy and multidisciplinary structures. Its focus is re-centering of civilizational confidence within it which does not reject the global modernity. This paper argues that NEP 2020 represents a transformative epistemological reorientation in Indian education. It's time for the

country to move beyond the colonial hierarchies of knowledge without abandoning global engagement.

Colonial Educational Architecture: Knowledge, Power and Hierarchy

The English education that was introduced by the British colonial administration was not a neutral civilizing mission, but a mechanism of governance. It was to facilitate imperial administration. Macaulay's "Minutes on Indian Education" shows his dismissal of Sanskrit and Arabic scholarship in favor of English literature and western science to establish European intellectual superiority.

Gauri Viswanathan has demonstrated that to secure ideological allegiance, how English literary education in colonial India functioned as a moral and cultural project. (Viswanathan 23-45). The aim of introducing English education was not to simply impart language proficiency but to reorient cultural aspirations. It reshaped elite identity and established epistemic legitimacy through western frameworks.

This dynamic has been further illuminated by Ashis Nandy's analysis of colonialism as a psychological and cultural system. The internalization of hierarchical categories was required by the colonial domination. (Nandy 2-6). Here, education was used as a primary vehicle for this internalization. On the one hand, English Language was elevated and on the other side, vernacular knowledge traditions were marginalized. With this, colonial education produced stratified access to authority.

Language operated as both tool and symbol. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has argued that language carries cultural memory and epistemic structure (Ngugi 16-19). The more dominance English language acquired, it reconfigured not only communication but also the modes of reasoning and evaluation. Indigenous epistemologies were ignored and relegated to folklore only and Western disciplines assumed scientific authority. By making English as a primary language of higher learning, the colonial regime displaced the vernacular intellectual traditions from formal institutional recognition.

This colonial infrastructure did not dissolve automatically with independence. The institutional habituation continued with English remaining dominant in higher academia. The post-independence India kept on carrying the colonial model of education. This made the need of reform not just on the surface level but a revision of a whole structure. The NEP 2020 arrived and challenged the hierarchies institutionalized during colonial rule by invoking Indian Knowledge Systems, multilingualism and holistic development.

It will be a mistake to assume colonial education as merely an episode in India's past. Its effects have been extended across generations. Therefore, the need for NEP 2020 as a representative of an epistemic shift becomes more prominent. The policy's transformative ambition lies in its attempt to renegotiate inherited hierarchies. It does that without discarding the gains of modern institutionalization. NEP 2020 aims to balance both the sides by preserving scientific rigor and global engagement while re-centering intellectual self-confidence.

Post-Independence Continuities and the persistence of colonial Grammar

When India got the political independence in 1947, it brought a decisive rupture in the country's constitutional and administrative history. Though the newly found freedom missed an epistemic rupture. The newly sovereign nation was carrying not only physical institutions such as universities, examination boards and bureaucratic departments but continued practicing intellectual habits established by the colonial rule. Here comes the term colonial grammar which can be realized by the underlying assumptions about knowledge, legitimacy and discipline that continued to structure the education sector long after the end of imperial governance.

Krishna Kumar in his work *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas* has stated that even nationalist educational discourse often retained colonial assumptions in forming disciplinary organization and examination

systems (Kumar 78-102). Though a big emphasis was on including Indian history, constitutional values and nation's priorities but the structural grammar of examinations, disciplinary divisions and linguistic hierarchy remained untouched. Be it standardized testing as the primary measure of merit or memorization-oriented pedagogy in the format of schooling persisted all over the country.

The constitution of India had recognized the regional languages and promoted Hindi across the states but English continued enjoying its central role in higher education and professional mobility. Other factors such as English facilitating access to global scholarship and international collaboration also played a significant role in its popularity. Quality English medium education was accessible to the urban privilege and socioeconomically uplifted class. Though the country was free but the linguistic hierarchy institutionalized under British rule thus continued to control the patterns of opportunity.

The examination culture that was established by the colonial party kept on strengthening its roots in the education system of the country. Standardized testing had originally served colonial bureaucratic recruitment. Aspirants for public sector employment, professional courses and elite institutions had only one way to achieve their goal and that was competitive exam. This turned the definition of academic worth directly related to examination performance. This resulted in influencing classroom pedagogy at all levels. Coverage of the syllabus was prioritized and conceptual depth was sidelined.

All of this called for the need to reform the education system of India. With rapid globalization in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, competition widened across the nations, connected the world and expanded the access to information. The arrival of digital technologies transformed modes of learning on the one hand, yet the structural inertia persisted. The gap between creativity, innovation and holistic growth and classroom practiced has widened even more.

It is against this backdrop of continuity that National Education Policy 2020 must be interpreted. NEP 2020 became a voice for the contemporary need which could provide a breakaway from the inherited grammar which is not applicable in the new world anymore. NEP 2020 has introduced multidisciplinary education, competency-based assessment, multilingual instruction and integration of Indian Knowledge Systems. The country realized that expansion without epistemic reorientation is insufficient.

The way colonial grammar has managed to persist in the education system long after the independence has proved that political sovereignty alone cannot guarantee intellectual self-definition. Epistemic autonomy requires conscious structural intervention. NEP 2020 successfully recognize and points out the historical limitations and proposes systemic redesign, positioning itself as a response to the unresolved inheritance.

NEP 2020: Philosophical Foundations and Civilizational Reorientation

NEP 2020 brought a change in attitude where the government of India articulated a vision of education rooted in "Indian ethos" while aspiring to global dominance (Government of India 4), instead of focusing on access and expansion only. NEP 2020 has made holistic development, flexibility, inclusivity and critical thinking as its most prominent philosophical principals.

The French psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon had emphasized liberation involves reclaiming cultural agency and self-definition (Fanon 168-72). For decades after independence, indigenous intellectual traditions were treated mere as cultural artifacts. NEP 2020 brought a conscious epistemic repositioning by putting major emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) which promotes the indigenous intellectual traditions and integrated them within mainstream curricula. Though it is important to recognize that the policy's goal is not to discard scientific rationality or international academic collaboration but to renegotiate epistemic parity. The policy's aim is to

diversify epistemic authority. It focusses on redefining the normative orientation of existing institution and not to dismantle it.

NEP 2020 should be treated more than a policy reform as it represents a conscious engagement with the politics of knowledge in a postcolonial society. The advocacy for epistemic plurality, dialogic pedagogy and institutional flexibility aligns NEP 2020 with broader philosophical debates about decolonization and knowledge power. Thus, this articulation of epistemic reorientation marks a significant conceptual departure from the inherited colonial education system.

Indian Knowledge Systems: From Inclusion to Epistemic Validation

It would be completely wrong to see the inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems just as symbolic nationalism. Its inclusion should be seen as epistemic validation. Validation entails recognition that diverse knowledge traditions possess intrinsic intellectual merit.

Earlier reforms mentioned cultural heritage in supplementary terms, whereas NEP 2020 has been promoting indigenous traditions within the structural vision of educational transformation (Government of India). Recognizing and teaching Indian intellectual history which encompasses diverse and sophisticated traditions across various streams such as philosophy, linguistics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, aesthetics, political theory and logic. From intricate theories of inference and epistemic validation developed by ancient classical systems such as Nyaya and Mimamsa, to nuanced analyses of perception and consciousness offered by Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist epistemology. Classical Indian philosophy is enriched with rigorous logical and epistemological frameworks comparable to western analytic traditions (Matilal 12-18). One of the most systematic linguistic analyses in world intellectual history is Panini's grammatical system which illustrates the methodical precision embedded in indigenous scholarship. Further contributions in

mathematics and global scientific development such as the formation of zero and decimal notation.

The colonial regime had dismissed the knowledge that did not conform to European taxonomies. Thus, Indian Knowledge systems were categorized as spiritual, mythic and pre-modern. Multiple generations of scholars and learners were taught to examine Indian traditions through secondary representations or in concern with cultural identity only. NEP 2020 challenges this inherited hierarchy and proposes the establishment of dedicated research centres, inclusion of classical texts in higher education and interdisciplinary engagement with traditional sciences and philosophies (Government of India). Unlike colonial attitude, NEP 2020's emphasis lies on plurality rather than substitution.

The policy has framed education as holistic development rather than narrow professional training by carefully situating ethics, environmental awareness, aesthetics literacy and cultural continuity alongside scientific proficiency (Government of India). Under NEP 2020, education plays an important role in shaping collective self-understanding.

According to Ashis Nandy, colonialism resulted in internalized hierarchies that shaped intellectual self-perception (Nandy 7-11). This brought attention to the fact that recentring of civilizational pedagogy also carries psychological implications. The institutional marginalization of indigenous traditions may generate internalized assumptions of inferiority among learners. NEP 2020 provides the recognition of multiple epistemic lineages as legitimate which cultivate epistemic confidence. Such confidence enables dialogic engagement free from internalized subordination.

NEP 2020 recognizes and works with the understanding that decolonization does not require withdrawal from global modernity but renegotiation of epistemic parity within it. The policy balances the coexistence of Indian Knowledge Systems and advocacy for international collaboration. The policy advocates for global partnerships and institutional

engagement (Government of India). Positioning India as participant and contributor in global knowledge production.

Multilingualism and linguistic democratization

Language plays a crucial part in education systems and epistemology. There is a relation between Language and knowledge, as knowledge is mediated through language. The hierarchy of languages within an educational system directly shapes the hierarchy of knowledge itself. For hundreds of years, English enjoyed the supreme treatment among other languages in the country. The English education was introduced and imparted with the mission of promoting and establishing colonial agenda and European value systems. It resulted in subordination and to a great extent rejection of regional languages in educational spaces and knowledge dissemination. NEP 2020 has recognized this relation between language and knowledge and advocates for multilingualism and mother tongue instruction particularly at the foundational and preparatory stages (Government of India).

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that language functions as a form of symbolic capital that confers social legitimacy within institutional contexts (Bourdieu 45-51). This when applied in Indian context, it can be realized that the disproportionate access to elite institutions and global opportunities was provided to English speakers. On the other hand, regional language speakers confronted the disadvantages in competitive examinations and higher academic spaces.

The need for shifting the hierarchy of one language to multilingualism and mother-tongue instruction-based learning is crucial. Learning foundational concepts in one's mother tongue enables a learner to engage with knowledge that resonates with his/her lived experiences. When cognitive processing occurs in familiar linguistic structures, it deepens the conceptual understanding. Also the fact that regional languages contain philosophical and cultural vocabularies that cannot be fully translated into English or any other distant language without

loss of nuance. So, one's own mother tongue or regional language with the epistemic richness embedded within it, is a legitimate medium of instruction.

Though it needs to be acknowledged that NEP 2020's advocacy for multilingualism rather than monolingual replacement tries to avoid simplistic linguistic nationalism. The policy's aim is not to eliminate the language English but to situate it within a broader multilingual framework. This balanced orientation reflects epistemic pragmatism.

Multidisciplinarity: Structural Transformation of Knowledge Organization

NEP 2020 calls for multidisciplinary higher education institutions and flexible curricular pathways (Government of India). India, for a very long time followed the 19th century European institutional frameworks in which knowledge was divided into demarcated disciplines. Streams such as literature, history, physics and economics were governed by specialized methodologies and internal criteria of legitimacy. Whereas classical Indian philosophical systems such as Nyaya and Vedanta did not isolate logic from metaphysics or language from ontology. The simultaneous engagement with grammar, rhetoric, ethics and epistemology was provided in scholarly training.

Nep 2020 has recognized the contemporary challenges such as climate change, public health, digital transformation and social inequality cannot be adequately addressed within isolated disciplinary boundaries (Government of India). The policy is moving from inherited fragmentation toward intellectual wholeness. Multidisciplinarity is strengthening the confidence in intellectual plurality.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 is an ambitious step taken by Indian government in favor of the education system of the country. it attempts to reconcile civilizational heritage with global modernity. The goal is to transform India's educational consciousness by recentering Indian knowledge traditions,

democratizing language, promoting interdisciplinarity and redefining pedagogy. Though one needs to remember that educational transformation is always a process than an event. It's success depends upon institutional will and societal commitment. The policy implementation already marks a significant moment in India's intellectual history. This is a moment where education is reimagined as the site of epistemic self-definition.

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