



The Structural and Ideological Transformation of the Indian Education System

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Abstract

This research examines the structural and ideological transition of the Indian education system from the access-centric framework of the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 to the quality-driven paradigm of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. While the RTE successfully achieved near-universal enrollment, persistent deficits in foundational learning evidenced by ASER data showing only 42% of Class 5 students possess Class 2 reading proficiency necessitated a systemic overhaul¹. The study analyzes the implementation of the new 5+3+3+4 structure and the role of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) as a centralizing force in operationalizing competency-based standards. Critical tension is identified between the NEP's aspirational flexibility and the administrative standardization practiced by the CBSE. The research highlights the "Jagruti" paradox within the School Quality Assessment and Assurance Framework (SQAAF), where public performance disclosures risk deepening the divide between elite "Exemplar" schools and under-resourced rural institutions². Furthermore, the study explores the rise of digital governance through the APAAR registry and the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR), noting how the inclusion of private "solution providers" shifts data oversight toward algorithmic management³. Finally, the paper addresses the erosion of educational federalism, specifically the fiscal coercion of Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) funds to enforce state compliance with central mandates⁴. The research concludes that for the NEP 2020 to achieve its "holistic" vision, the implementation framework must move beyond performative metrics and embrace genuine pedagogical autonomy to prevent a "standardization of disadvantage" among marginalized student populations⁵.

Keywords: Policy & Governance, National Education Policy, Educational Federalism, Digital Transformation, Pedagogical Autonomy

¹ ASER Centre, *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2024*, (New Delhi: Pratham Education Foundation, 2024).

² Ministry of Education, *PM-SHRI Schools: Guidelines for Exemplar Schools (Jagruti Tier)*, (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

³ Ministry of Education, *National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR): Architectural Blueprint*, (New Delhi: Government of India, 2021)

⁴ *The Hindu*, "Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal have received no funds under Samagra Shiksha for 2024-25," February 2025.

⁵ Observer Research Foundation (ORF), "Standardization of Disadvantage: The Equity Challenge in Indian Education Reform," *ORF Issue Brief*, 2024.

Introduction

The landscape of Indian education is currently navigating a period of profound transition, moving away from the purely access-oriented objectives of the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 towards a more complex, quality-centric paradigm established by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This shift is not merely administrative; it represents an organizational and constructional reimagining of how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and measured across the nation. The RTE Act was successful in achieving near-universal enrolment, yet it presided over a decade where foundational learning outcomes remained stubbornly low. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) provided the empirical catalyst for this realization, documenting that only 42 percent of rural children in Class 5 could read text at a Class 2 level.⁶

This systemic deficit necessitated a move away from rote-learning toward what the NEP 2020 describes as a global citizen framework, emphasizing critical thinking, digital literacy, and holistic development.⁷

The implementation of this vision primarily rests upon the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), an organisation that oversees more than 30,000 schools and functions as the nation's most powerful centralizing force in education. However, a significant mismatch has emerged between the aspirational flexibility of the NEP and the operational standardization practiced by the CBSE. While the policy advocates for a joyful and learning-centred pedagogy, the actual implementation often defaults to high-stakes accountability and centralized mandates that may exacerbate existing socio-economic exclusions. This analysis critically examines the operationalization of NEP 2020 directives, the pedagogical versus political imperatives driving these reforms, and the implications for equity and learning outcomes across diverse student populations.⁸

1. Foundational literacy and the empirical catalyst for reform

The transition toward the National Education Policy 2020 was heavily influenced by a decade of data suggesting that while more children were in school, fewer were learning. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021, which evaluated 3.4 million students across Classes 3, 5, 8, and 10, confirmed the deep foundational learning gaps first identified by non-governmental organizations like Pratham. The data indicated that the Indian education system was facing a learning crisis that threatened to undermine the demographic dividend. Consequently, the Ministry of Education shifted its focus from enrolment to proficiency in foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN).

The NIPUN Bharat mission, launched in July 2021, represents the operational response to this crisis. It aims to ensure that every child achieves basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills by the end of Grade 3. This mission is not merely a pedagogical intervention; it is a centralized monitoring framework that utilizes tools like the Lakshya Soochi (target list) and Vidya Samiksha Kendras (data centers) to track progress across 36 states and Union Territories. This reliance on data-driven governance marks a departure from the qualitative and decentralised aspirations of the 2005 National Curriculum Framework.⁹

⁶ ASER Centre, "Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2024," 2024.

⁷ Ministry of Education, "National Education Policy 2020," 2020

⁸ Ministry of Education, "National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021," 2021.

⁹ iDream Education, "NIPUN Bharat Initiative: Goals, Implementation & Impact," 2021

Indicators of foundational literacy

Indicator	ASER 2024 / NAS 2021 Findings	Policy Response (NEP 2020)
Reading Proficiency	42% of Class 5 students can read at Class 2 level.	Launch of NIPUN Bharat Mission.
Numeracy Gaps	Significant deficiencies in basic subtraction/division.	Focus on FLN by Grade 3.
Assessment	Rote-learning dominant.	Competency-based assessments.
Early Childhood	Largely informal or neglected.	Integration of ECCE in 5+3+3+4 structure.

The 2024 ASER recorded a 7 percentage point improvement in reading and subtraction skills for Grade 3, suggesting that the mission's focus is beginning to yield results in specific states like Uttar Pradesh, which saw a 12 point rise in reading proficiency.⁶ However, the success of these initiatives depends heavily on the state's capacity to translate central policy into classroom practice, a process often hindered by infrastructure deficits and the varying quality of teacher training.

2. The 5+3+3+4 structure: A developmental realignment and CBSE and the challenge of street-level implementation

One of the most significant structural changes introduced by NEP 2020 is the replacement of the 10+2 system with a 5+3+3+4 model. This realignment is designed to match the cognitive and developmental stages of children, particularly focusing on the critical early years between ages 3 and 8. This stage, now termed the Foundational Stage, includes three years of pre-schooling followed by Grades 1 and 2. The subsequent Preparatory (Grades 3-5), Middle (Grades 6-8), and Secondary (Grades 9-12) stages are intended to provide a seamless transition from play-based learning to multidisciplinary study.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 serves as the blueprint for this transition. It is the fifth such framework in India's history, following those of 1975, 1988, 2000, and 2005. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 was developed through a massive consultative process involving 4,000 experts across State Focus Groups and a National Steering Committee led by the Ministry of Education. The framework emphasizes that curriculum is a roadmap for students, providing exposure to diverse subjects and practical experiences.

Stages of Learning¹⁰

Stage	Duration	Ages	Pedagogy
Foundational	5 Years	3 - 8	Play-based, Jaadui Pitara, motor skills.
Preparatory	3 Years	8 - 11	Interactive, formal literacy and numeracy.
Middle	3 Years	11 - 14	Experiential sciences, math, and social sciences.
Secondary	4 Years	14 - 18	Student choice, multidisciplinary, critical thinking.

While the framework presents a progressive vision, its implementation is fraught with challenges related to "contextual sensitivity." Critics argue that the document, despite being nearly 600 pages long,

¹⁰ Ministry of Education, "National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023," 2023, "National Curriculum Framework (NCF): An In-Depth Guide," 2025, Author: Shradha Raj.

fails to explicitly identify and address the needs of historically marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and religious minorities. By utilizing a universalist rhetoric of inclusion, the NCF-SE 2023 risks perpetuating institutional silences on the specific barriers, such as caste-based exclusion or linguistic marginalization, that these learners face.

Despite the NCF-SE 2023's progressive focus on "equity and inclusion," the framework's universalist rhetoric often creates an "institutional silence" by failing to explicitly name and dismantle the structural mechanics of caste-based exclusion and linguistic marginalization.¹¹ The "inclusive classroom culture" is a hollow concept in many rural schools where casteist practices, like separate seating or discriminatory grading, continue behind a veil of policy-driven neutrality, according to criticisms from educators, as highlighted in reports by the Observer Research Foundation (2025) and UNESCO's State of Education Report (2025). Additionally, the framework's "Three-Language Formula," which purports to support the mother tongue, frequently causes tribal and minority language learners to be marginalized linguistically due to a lack of bilingual infrastructure. This effectively forces these children into dominant regional or state languages, perpetuating the very learning gaps that the policy purports to close.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is the primary vehicle for operationalizing the NEP 2020 across its vast network of 30,000 schools. However, the Board's centralized authority creates a tension between the policy's demand for flexibility and the administrative need for standardization. This tension is best analysed through the lens of Lipsky's idea of Street-Level Bureaucracy. Teachers and school administrators, as street-level bureaucrats, are responsible for interpreting the abstract goals of the NEP such as competency-based learning into daily classroom routines.¹²

In conditions of resource scarcity and high administrative loads, teachers often resort to "coping mechanisms." Research on the NIPUN Bharat mission indicates that even when materials and training are provided, teacher adoption remains low due to cognitive overload and a reduced sense of agency caused by micromanagement. A study by the Centre for Social and Behaviour Change (CSBC) found that digital micro-practice videos actually had a negative effect on teachers' self-rated ability to achieve learning goals, as they felt overwhelmed by the technical requirements and the lack of personalized support.

This implementation gap is particularly evident in the transition to competency-based assessments. While the CBSE has introduced the PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) centre to standardize these assessments, many teachers still rely on rote-learning strategies to ensure high pass rates in board examinations. The lack of high-quality, in-person training, supplemented rather than replaced by digital courses like NISHTHA, has resulted in a "low-fidelity compliance" where the terminology of the NEP is adopted, but the underlying pedagogy remains unchanged.

3. Syllabus rationalization and the politics of knowledge

A significant controversy under the NEP 2020 framework involves the "rationalization" of the school syllabus. Officially justified as a post-COVID-19 measure to reduce student load and align with the policy's goal of "less content, more learning," the NCERT and CBSE implemented a 30 percent reduction in course material. However, critical analysis by historians and educators suggests that the selection of content for removal follows a strategic ideological pattern.

The deleted sections primarily include topics related to diversity, socio-political conflict, and critiques of state power. For example, chapters on socio-political movements, the 2002 Gujarat riots, the

¹¹ Banaras Hindu University, "Bridging the Equity Gap: An Analysis of NCF-SE 2023," 2025.

¹² Lipsky, M., "Street-Level Bureaucracy," CSBC report, 2024.

Emergency period, and portions of the Mughal era have been removed from secondary textbooks. Mohan Malawya, writing in *Eurasia Review*, argues that these revisions represent a "campaign to rewrite history" to fit a specific national narrative.¹³

Rationalised Syllabus¹⁴

Topic Removed	Category	Official Justification
2002 Gujarat Riots	Contemporary History	Avoid selective riot mentioning; create "positive citizens".
Mughal Era (Portions)	Medieval History	Reduce historical load; emphasize indigenous kings.
US Hegemony / Cold War	International Politics	Overlapping content; relevance issues.
Socio-political movements	Civic Studies	Curriculum streamlining for focus on core values.

The NCERT Chairman, Dinesh Saklani, has defended these excisions by stating that students should not learn about riots as it may produce "violent and depressed individuals". Yet, pedagogical experts argue that sanitizing history deprives students of the tools needed to navigate a diverse and complex world, ultimately stifling the "critical thinking" that the NEP 2020 purports to foster. This centralized control over historical narratives ensures that the classroom functions as a space for constructing a state-approved social reality.

4. Digital infrastructure and the architecture of exclusion

The NEP 2020's push for digital literacy is anchored in the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR), launched by the Prime Minister in July 2021. NDEAR is a technological framework designed to enable interoperable "building blocks" for the education ecosystem, involving government, civil society, and market players. Platforms like DIKSHA have become central to this architecture, providing e-content and teacher training resources.

While NDEAR aims to catalyse innovation, it also risks institutionalizing the digital divide. Analysis of Information and Communication Technology is used to demonstrate that even at higher income levels, the digital literacy gap between rural and urban populations remains as high as 35 percent.²² The centralized promotion of Ed-Tech infrastructure, even when state-led, functions as a new "institutional filter," where student success is determined more by pre-existing socio-economic access to high-speed internet and hardware than by the quality of the curriculum. Furthermore, the NDEAR Ecosystem Policy opens the door for private capital in the education sector. By designing the architecture as a "super connector," the state allows private organizations to develop platforms and solutions that leverage student and teacher data.

Through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR), the state establishes "open-source" digital sandboxes that enable private EdTech companies to connect to centralized data streams such as UDISE+ and the Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR). In order to create individualized learning dashboards and administrative tools, private organizations can obtain detailed student performance metrics and teacher behavioural data by serving as "solution providers," frequently under the pretexts of enhancing productivity or learning outcomes.¹⁵ Project SATH-E (Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital), a tripartite agreement between NITI Aayog, state governments (like Odisha and Madhya Pradesh), and private knowledge partners like the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and the Piramal Foundation, is one particular example of this. In

¹³ *Eurasia Review*, "NCERT's Historical Revisions – OpEd," 2024

¹⁴ NCERT Text Book, 2022-23

¹⁵ Ministry of Education, "NDEAR Ecosystem Policy," 2021.

order to create "remediation" platforms and teacher-monitoring systems, private organizations in these states directly analyse state-wide student assessment data. This effectively shifts the role of data governance from public oversight to private, algorithmic management, which may put product scalability ahead of pedagogical nuance.¹⁶

This shift raises significant concerns regarding data privacy and surveillance. A report from New America highlights that misused or poorly designed security systems in Ed-Tech can erode student agency and exacerbate inequities. Without clear guidelines on data minimization and encryption¹⁷on, the rapid push for digitalization may lead to the commodification of student learning profiles. The digital divide in India exacerbates this disadvantage since students from underprivileged backgrounds frequently lack the digital literacy to comprehend complicated "terms of service," leaving them open to data harvesting and predatory marketing. For instance, privacy advocates are concerned about the mandatory implementation of the APAAR (One Nation, One ID) system, which links a student's entire academic journey, including sensitive socioeconomic data and disability status, to a centralized ID that can be accessed by different third-party "service providers" in the absence of a strong, localized data protection framework. This centralization of data ensures that a "digital scar" can be created, where a child's early learning or behaviour is commodified and tracked by private companies, which may inform future college admissions or job opportunities through biased algorithms the student has no ability to challenge.¹⁸

5. The repeal of the No-Detention Policy and standards-based accountability

NDP was no administrative decision taken overnight; rather, it was the result of a pedagogical discourse spanning over decades to transform Indian education system from a "sifting" (sieving) one to 'nurturing'. The ideological precursor for it is the Yash Pal Committee's 1993 report, "Learning Without Burden," which emphasized how "the fear of failure" and "joyless learning" were driving children from disadvantaged backgrounds out of schools.¹⁹Before the implementation of the RTE Act 2009, India's primary school dropout rate was alarmingly high, recorded at approximately 25.7% in 2005-06, often because detention was used as a punitive tool that stigmatized first-generation learners. By the first decade of implementation (circa 2018-19), the NDP played a critical role in lowering the primary level dropout to ~1.5%, rendering admission and retention effectively universal; yet, this quantitative success was offset by a qualitative price, that is, transition into secondary school (Class 9-10) was met with a steep "dropout peak" of 17%, thus indicating that the policy had continued rather than addressed early learning deficits. However, its operational failure, documented by ASER led to its repeal for Classes 5 and 8 in late 2024.²⁰The new rules mandate that students who fail their year-end exams must be provided remedial instruction and a second chance; if they fail again, they can be detained in the same grade.

The implementation debacle of the No-Detention Policy was essentially about a wide "learning to enrolment" gap in which there was no convergence between universal retention and actual learning. Key indicators of this failure included the "silent dropout" problem in which students were present but not learning, as well as a 10% drop in basic reading between 2010 and 2014 according to ASER²¹, where by 2022 only wanted percent of class five could read a class two level text.

¹⁶ NITI Aayog, *Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital (SATH-E) Progress Report*, (New Delhi: NITI Aayog in collaboration with BCG and Piramal Foundation, 2021).

¹⁷ New America, *The Digital Scar: Privacy, Surveillance, and the Future of Student Agency in Ed-Tech*, (Washington D.C.: New America, 2024).

¹⁸ Ministry of Education, "One Nation, One Student ID (APAAR): Guidelines and Implementation," Government of India, accessed 2025.

¹⁹ Ministry of Human Resource Development, *Learning Without Burden: Report of the Advisory Committee Appointed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (Yash Pal Committee)*, (New Delhi: Government of India, 1993).

²⁰ India Didactics Association, "India Scraps No-Detention Policy," *India Didactics News*, 2025.

²¹ ASER Centre, *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2014*, (New Delhi: Pratham Education Foundation, 2015).

This system-wide gridlock finally erupted in a "secondary shock," as his lack of early-grade accountability triggered a discontinuity crisis; post-repeal data from 2024 suggested that nearly 13% of Class-8 students and more than 8% of Class-5 students failed their first year-end exams, revealing the accumulated learning deficiencies concealed by years of automatic promotion.²²

This reversal marks an ideological turn toward "standards-based accountability." Educators, such as Dr. Rukmini Banerji of the Pratham Education Foundation, argue that automatic promotion inadvertently allowed students to move ahead without acquiring necessary skills.²³ However, the policy creates a new set of challenges. Retention is closely linked to diminished self-esteem, social stigma, and higher dropout rates, particularly among marginalized students who lack the household resources to catch up during "remedial" periods.

Data from the Economic Survey 2024-25 shows that retention rates plummet as students move from primary to secondary education, with only 45.6 percent of students remaining in the system through Class 12.

Trends in Student Retention and Attrition²⁴

Level of Schooling	Dropout Rate (%)	Retention Rate (%)
Primary (Classes 1-5)	1.9%	85.4%
Upper Primary (Classes 1-8)	5.2%	78.0%
Secondary (Classes 1-10)	14.1%	63.8%
Higher Secondary (Classes 1-12)	N/A	45.6%

By reinstating detention, the government risks further depressing these retention rates unless the "additional instruction" mandated by the law is backed by substantial resource allocation and specialized teacher training. In reality, the centralized mandate for accountability often offloads the burden of failure onto students and teachers without addressing the systemic infrastructure gaps.²⁵

Popular response to this shift has been deeply polarized, with a 2024 Hindustan Times report noting that while many school principals and parents in urban centres like Delhi welcome the move as a way to "restore academic discipline," many educationists warn that it ignores the ground reality of under-resourced schools.²⁶ Public opinion, as captured in various regional debates, reflects a growing fear among rural parents that the "re-examination" window is merely a formality, as students already struggling with foundational gaps are unlikely to achieve mastery in just two months without specialized support. For students, the return of high-stakes exams in Classes 5 and 8 has reportedly intensified "exam anxiety" and mental health stress, particularly in marginalized communities where the risk of being held back carries a heavy social stigma²⁷; as noted in a Times of India analysis, the reintroduction of detention without a parallel surge in teacher hiring and remedial infrastructure risks "punishing the child for the failures of the system," leading to a potential spike in dropouts among the very demographic the original RTE Act sought to protect.

²² Hindustan Times, "First Results Post-NDP Repeal: Failure Rates in Class 5 and 8 Surge," *Hindustan Times*, June 2024.

²³ Pratham Education Foundation, "Commentary on Standards-Based Accountability and Foundational Learning," *Pratham Resource Portal*, 2024.

²⁴ Ministry of Finance, *Economic Survey 2024-25*, (New Delhi: Department of Economic Affairs, Government of India, 2025)

²⁵ Economic Times, "Economic Survey: School dropout rates declined," 2025.

²⁶ Hindustan Times, "Delhi Schools Welcome Return of Detention for Higher Classes," *Hindustan Times*, 2024.

²⁷ Times of India, "Exam Anxiety and the Social Stigma of Detention: An Analysis," *Times of India*, 2024.

6. Vocationalisation and the risk of social tracking

A major innovation of the NEP 2020 is the early introduction of vocational education from Class 6 onwards. This includes exposure to carpentry, coding, gardening, and entrepreneurship through "bagless days" and internships with local artisans. The policy aims for at least 50 percent of learners to have exposure to vocational education by 2025, aligning schooling outputs with the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF). While vocationalisation is intended to enhance employability and reduce the stigma associated with manual labour, there are deep-seated sociological concerns regarding "social tracking." This risk of "social tracking" is particularly acute in India because it operates within a traditional framework of hereditary occupational structures, where the NCF-SE 2023's push for vocational exposure from Grade 6 could inadvertently mirror the "caste-based division of labour" rather than the "division of laborers." Critics argue that without a rigorous, "neutral" counselling mechanism, students from historically marginalized communities (SC/ST/OBC) are often nudged toward vocational skills, like carpentry or tailoring, that align with their ancestral occupations, effectively institutionalizing their socio-economic position under the guise of "skill development." This is further exacerbated by the resource chasm between urban and rural schools; while elite private schools might offer high-tech vocational tracks like coding or robotics, rural government schools, crippled by a lack of specialized trainers and functional workshops, often settle for "traditional" crafts. According to a 2025 report in *The Hindu*, this creates a "dual-track" system where the vocational stream becomes a "ghettoized" path for the poor, while the academic "merit" track remains a gatekept sanctuary for the privileged, thereby reinforcing the very stigma and structural inequality the policy intended to erase.

If the skill-based pathways do not allow for seamless transition back into higher academic studies, the policy may inadvertently lock students into low-remuneration labour markets. Current industry surveys reveal that only 40 to 45 percent of Indian graduates are employable, highlighting that vocational training must be of high quality and industry-aligned to be effective. Without adequate funding and infrastructure, these programs may remain theoretical, serving as a placeholder rather than a genuine tool for economic empowerment.

7. Federalism and the fiscal coercion of Samagra Shiksha and State-level resistance and alternative education policies

The implementation of NEP 2020 has fundamentally challenged the cooperative nature of educational federalism in India. Education is a Concurrent subject, yet the central government has increasingly utilized centralized funding as a tool for enforcing compliance with its policy mandates. A prominent example is the conflict over the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) funds for the financial year 2024-25. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has maintained that the release of the central share of funds, which follows a 60:40 split with most states is dependent on the submission of utilization certificates and compliance with scheme norms, including the implementation of the NEP 2020 and the PM-SHRI school MoU.²⁸ As of March 2025, the Centre had not released any SSA funds to Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal.²⁹

State-wise SSA Funding and Compliance (FY 2024-25)³⁰

²⁸ *The Hindu*, "Centre Linkage of SSA Funds to PM-SHRI Schools and NEP Compliance," September 2024.

²⁹ *The Hindu*, "Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal have received no funds under Samagra Shiksha for 2024-25," February 2025.

³⁰ Table data compiled from: Ministry of Education, *Financial Release Status of Samagra Shiksha (2024-25)* and *The Hindu* reports.

State	Approved Central Share (in ₹ Crore)	Funds Released (FY 2024-25)	Conflict Point
Tamil Nadu	2,151.60	0.00	Refusal of 3-Language Formula/PMSHRI MoU.
West Bengal	1,745.80	0.00	Alternative State Education Policy/SSA misuse allegations.
Kerala	328.90	0.00	Dilemma over signing PM-SHRI MoU.
Uttar Pradesh	6,971.26	4,487.46	NEP-compliant; highest beneficiary.
Madhya Pradesh	3,434.71	3,434.71	NEP-compliant; Full share released.
Rajasthan	3,090.65	3,090.65	NEP-compliant; Integrated PM-SHRI and NIPUN Bharat.
Bihar	4,217.81	4,217.81	NEP-compliant; Focus on foundational literacy.
Maharashtra	1,126.24	1,126.24	NEP-compliant; Full disbursement following MoU.
Assam	2,026.77	2,026.77	NEP-compliant; Major focus on rural vocationalisation
Gujarat	1,245.54	1,245.54	NEP-compliant; Early adopter of PM-SHRI schools

The Tamil Nadu government, led by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, has termed this withholding of funds as "blackmail" and "arm-twisting".³¹ The state argues that its two-language policy (Tamil and English) is essential to protecting regional identity and that the Centre is using the NEP to secretly push Hindi imposition.³² This fiscal standoff has "severely impacted teachers' salaries, RTE reimbursements, and transportation for students in remote areas," as noted by a Parliamentary Standing Committee.³³ Teachers on the ground have voiced deep frustration over being caught in this federal crossfire, with many reporting that they are struggling to meet basic household expenses after months of unpaid wages.³⁴ In a report by *The New Indian Express* (2024), members of the Tamil Nadu Primary School Teachers Federation (TNPTF) condemned the withholding of funds, stating that the "unconditional" release of Samagra Shiksha grants is a constitutional duty that should not be leveraged to enforce the NEP 2020. Similarly, educators in West Bengal and Kerala have described the situation as "arm-twisting," noting that while they are expected to implement complex pedagogical shifts like foundational literacy programs, they are forced to do so while "running schools with the bare minimum," often paying for basic classroom supplies like chalk and worksheets out of their own pockets. This sentiment is echoed across protest sites in Madurai and Kolkata, where teacher unions have warned that treating education as a bargaining chip not only demoralizes the workforce but actively violates the federal spirit, effectively "punishing the teachers and innocent students" for a policy stalemate they did not create. The use of education funds to enforce political and ideological standardization threatens the democratic principle of state autonomy in education.

³¹ *The Hindu*, "Tamil Nadu opposes NEP language formula; SSA funds withheld," 2025.

³² *The Hindu*, "Stalin writes to PM: Withholding SSA funds is arm-twisting," 2024

³³ Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, *Report on Implementation of Samagra Shiksha*, 2024

³⁴ *The New Indian Express*, "Teachers across TN protest over unpaid salaries due to SSA fund delay," October 2024.

In response to the centralized push of NEP 2020, states like Karnataka and West Bengal have formulated their own State Education Policies (SEP). These documents represent an attempt to protect regional pedagogical autonomy while addressing local socio-economic realities. The Karnataka State Education Policy (SEP), released in a 2,197-page draft, characterizes the Central NEP as "unscientific" and "detrimental to the federal system".³⁵ The Karnataka policy prioritizes social justice through free education for girls up to graduation and the implementation of Article 15(5) to ensure reservations in private unaided institutions. Curricularly, it rejects the 5+3+3+4 structure in favour of a revised course structure that emphasizes Kannada as the medium of instruction up to Class 5 and a bilingual approach in higher education³⁶.

Similarly, the West Bengal State Education Policy 2023 recommends a three-language formula for Classes 5 to 8 but makes Bengali a mandatory subject from Class 1 to 10 for students in all mediums of instruction³⁷. West Bengal has also rejected the Central directive to abolish Class 10 board examinations, proposing instead a phased introduction of a semester system from Class 8 onwards³⁸ to ease the transition to university. These divergent pathways demonstrate that the "one-size-fits-all" approach of the CBSE-led NEP implementation is fundamentally incompatible with India's linguistic and cultural heterogeneity.

8. Standardization and the role of PARAKH in assessment reform

To address the disparities between different state boards and the CBSE, the National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, was established in February 8, 2023 under the NCERT.³⁹ PARAKH is tasked with setting common standards for evaluation across all 60+ school boards in India to ensure "equivalence" of certificates for college admissions. This initiative involves the use of Question Paper Templates (QPTs) and Equivalence Questionnaires (EQQ) to analyse cognitive demand and inclusiveness across boards.⁴⁰ While the vision of PARAKH is to eliminate the "equivalence penalty" faced by students from rural state boards, critics point out the immense resource disparities between boards like those in rural Uttar Pradesh and those in Maharashtra or the CBSE.

Specifically, educational experts argue that imposing a "uniform competency-based standard" without addressing the infrastructure and teacher-training chasm risks further marginalizing students in under-resourced districts. For instance, while the PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024 report showed that rural students sometimes edge ahead in foundational grades, by Class 9, urban students from elite boards significantly outperform their rural counterparts in science and math, subjects that require the very laboratories and specialized faculty that rural state boards often lack.⁴¹ Critics from organizations like the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) note that "high performance does not guarantee equity", as centralized standards can mask deep-seated caste and regional hierarchies⁴²; without massive financial investment in rural school "health checks," the push for board equivalence may become a "standardization of disadvantage," where rural students are judged against benchmarks they were never equipped to meet. Without substantial capacity-building funds, the mandate for standardization risks further penalizing under-resourced schools that cannot meet the "nationally equivalent" benchmarks. Moreover, the focus on

³⁵ NammaKPSC, "National Education Policy V/S Karnataka State Education Policy: A Comparative Analysis," 2025

³⁶ Government of Karnataka, *Draft Karnataka State Education Policy (SEP)*, 2024

³⁷ *The Economic Times*, "Bengal's new education policy mandates students learn 3 languages in Classes 5-8," 2025.

³⁸ *The Hindu*, "West Bengal education department notifies new State Education Policy," 2023.

³⁹ National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), "Establishment of PARAKH: National Assessment Centre," (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023).

⁴⁰ NCERT, *Equivalence of Boards: Towards Harmonizing India's School Boards (PARAKH)*, (New Delhi: NCERT, 2023)

⁴¹ PARAKH, *Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024: A Report on Learning Outcomes across Rural and Urban India*, (New Delhi: NCERT/Ministry of Education, 2024).

⁴² Observer Research Foundation (ORF), "Standardization of Disadvantage: The Equity Challenge in Indian Education Reform," *ORF Issue Brief*, 2024

standardizing board exams may inadvertently reinforce the "exam-centric" culture that the NEP 2020 explicitly sought to replace with "skill-based" education.

Popular opinion on this standardization remains deeply divided, often reflecting a tension between the desire for fairness and the fear of systemic rigidity. According to a report by *The Indian Express* (2024), while some student organizations and parents in urban centres welcome PARAKH as a tool to end "competitive grade inflation" and the "equivalence penalty" during university admissions, others are wary of its practical impact.⁴³ Many educators, particularly from the Punjab Government School Teachers' Union, have argued that the heavy focus on preparing for standardized competency tests like the PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan has inadvertently created a "testing treadmill." In these schools, teachers have reported being forced to "teach to the data," sometimes making students memorize answers to complex worksheets just to meet state-mandated targets,⁴⁴ thereby sacrificing regular classroom instruction and concept clarity. Critics in states like Kerala have voiced similar concerns, suggesting that a centralized "single-window" assessment framework threatens the autonomy of state boards and could alienate students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.⁴⁵ Ultimately, as noted in various *Times of India* editorials, the public sentiment reflects a concern that without a massive investment in school infrastructure, PARAKH might simply replace the "old rote learning" with a "new standardized anxiety," reinforcing an exam-centric culture rather than the holistic, child-centric vision of the NEP.

The School Quality Assessment and Assurance Framework (SQAAF), developed by PARAKH, provides schools with a roadmap for growth through three aspirational levels: Abhilasha (Aspiring), Pragati (Progressing), and Jagriti (Exemplary).⁴⁶ This framework emphasizes sports integration, mental health support, and indigenous wisdom. However, the requirement for "public disclosure of performance" may create a competitive market for school rankings, further disadvantaging institutions in marginalized communities that lack the infrastructure to achieve "Jagriti" status.

In the context of recent Indian educational reforms, "Jagriti" status refers to the highest tier of recognition within the School Quality Assessment and Assurance (SQAA) framework, specifically associated with the PM-SHRI (Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India) scheme⁴⁷. It represents an "Exemplar" level of achievement where a school has successfully saturated all National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 mandates ranging from high-tech infrastructure and "Jadui Pitara" (foundational kits) to advanced mental health support and community-linked vocational labs. The relevance of this status is twofold: it acts as a "benchmark" for neighbouring schools to emulate, but it also serves as a critical data point for the "public disclosure of performance."

Critics argue that by publicly branding schools with labels like "Jagriti," the government creates a hierarchical school market. In this competitive landscape, elite government schools that secure this status attract better resources and parental preference, while schools in marginalized or rural areas are often struggling with basic electricity or teacher vacancies are left with lower "rankings."⁴⁸ This visibility paradox ensures that institutions already facing infrastructure gaps are further penalized by a public "shame" of non-performance, potentially leading to a concentration of privilege in "Jagriti" hubs while the "silenced" schools fall further behind.⁴⁹

⁴³ *The Indian Express*, "PARAKH: A Tool for Fairness or a New Testing Treadmill?," *The Indian Express*, 2024.

⁴⁴ *The Tribune*, "Punjab School Teachers Union Protests Against Standardized Testing Targets," 2024.

⁴⁵ *The Times of India*, "Kerala Cautions Against Centralized Assessment Frameworks," *Times of India Editorial*, 2024.

⁴⁶ CBSE, *School Quality Assessment and Assurance Framework (SQAAF) Guidelines*, (New Delhi: CBSE, 2024).

⁴⁷ Ministry of Education, *PM-SHRI Schools: Guidelines for Exemplar Schools (Jagriti Tier)*, (New Delhi: Government of India, 2024).

⁴⁸ *The Times of India*, "The Jagriti Paradox: How School Rankings May Deepen the Rural-Urban Divide," 2024.

⁴⁹ PARAKH, *Public Disclosure of Performance and School Quality Assurance*, (New Delhi: NCERT, 2023).

9. Conclusion

The transition to a two-cycle board examination system, starting in 2026 for Class 10, is marketed as a way to reduce student stress by providing multiple opportunities to perform. However, mental health professionals and educators argue that this may merely "redistribute" stress across the entire academic year. The promise of flexibility is often circumscribed by rigid rules; for instance, students must appear in the first cycle to qualify for the second, and the pressure of practical assessments which remain one-time events continues to weigh heavily on students.⁵⁰

The adolescent mental health crisis in India, characterized by spikes in anxiety and depression during exam months, suggests that administrative tinkering with exam schedules is insufficient. A meaningful reform would require a cultural shift away from using board results as the sole indicator of a child's worth, alongside massive investment in school-based counselling services a component that remains under-funded in the current implementation landscape⁵¹.

To bridge the gap between aspirational rhetoric and ground reality, meaningful reform must prioritize decentralized empowerment and resource equity. Beyond just counselling, a critical addition would be the institutionalization of School Management Committees (SMCs) with actual budgetary autonomy, allowing local communities to address specific infrastructure deficits rather than waiting for top-down mandates⁵². Furthermore, shifting from "high-stakes" standardized testing to low-stakes, formative portfolios, where a child's progress is tracked through projects and peer-evaluations, would de-centre board exams and truly honour the "holistic" vision of the NCF-SE⁵³.

Ultimately, the National Education Policy 2020's implementation through the centralized CBSE framework exposes a significant gap between operational reality on the ground and aspirational rhetoric. The transition from rote-learning to competency-based, experiential education is a necessary pedagogical advance, yet its delivery is mediated by a governance regime driven by standardization, measurement, and centralized oversight.

The reliance on centralized data instruments like the National Achievement Survey to justify policy shifts, such as the repeal of the No-Detention Policy, illustrates a move toward "quantifiable performance" at the expense of substantive, resource-intensive pedagogical support⁵⁴. The "Street-Level Bureaucrats" -teachers remain the primary site of reform failure, caught between the demands of a complex new curriculum and the realities of cognitive overload and infrastructure deficit⁵⁵. Furthermore, the education system is increasingly serving as a site of political control and ideological formation, as evidenced by the strategic rationalization of the curriculum and the fiscal coercion imposed on states that disagree⁵⁶. The digital transformation, while modernizing, risks deepening existing structural inequalities through a new "architecture of exclusion."

⁵⁰ Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), "Circular on Two-Cycle Board Examination System for Class X," (New Delhi: CBSE, 2024).

⁵¹ *The Times of India*, "Exam Anxiety and the Mental Health Crisis: Why Schedule Changes Aren't Enough," *Times of India Analysis*, 2024.

⁵² Right to Education (RTE) Forum, "Strengthening School Management Committees (SMCs) for Decentralized Governance," *Policy Brief*, 2024

⁵³ Ministry of Education, *National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023*, (New Delhi: Government of India, 2023)

⁵⁴ Ministry of Education, *National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021: National Report*, (New Delhi: NCERT, 2021).

⁵⁵ Lipsky, M., *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980), as applied in CSBC Teacher Evaluation Report, 2024

⁵⁶ *Eurasia Review*, "NCERT's Historical Revisions – OpEd," June 2024.

For the NEP 2020 to deliver its promise of high-quality, inclusive education for all, the implementation framework must move beyond performative standardization and embrace the genuine pedagogical autonomy and socio-economic sensitivity required to reach the most marginalized children of the nation. Without this change, the goal of a "second to none" educational system might continue to be an unattainable goal obscured by the metrics of centralized accountability.

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