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INDIA'S NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: TECHNOLOGY AS GAME CHANGER FOR TEACHING-LEARNING OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract:
India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a groundbreaking vision for 21st-century education, acknowledging the pivotal role of technology in reshaping the learning process for all, including children with disabilities (CWDs). Emphasizing the imperative of inclusive education, the NEP 2020 advocates for the elimination of barriers obstructing CWDs' access to and engagement in education, with technology emerging as a crucial catalyst for inclusivity. Technology offers diverse avenues for supporting the education of CWDs, such as assistive technologies (ATs), including screen readers, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, facilitating communication, information access, and learning participation. Additionally, technology can craft immersive, interactive learning experiences through educational games, simulations, and personalized learning resources. The NEP 2020 underscores the infusion of technology into all educational facets, encompassing e-learning content development, teacher training, and infrastructure provision. This policy signifies a significant stride towards inclusive education, ensuring quality education for all, including CWDs, through the transformative potential of technology. Specific applications encompass screen readers for the visually impaired, text-to-speech software for dyslexic students, speech-to-text software for those with mobility impairments, AAC devices for communication impairments, educational games, and individualized learning materials delivered via online platforms and educational apps. The NEP 2020 offers a blueprint for the comprehensive integration of technology, fostering a more inclusive and accessible educational ecosystem. Leveraging technology's capabilities, we can forge a more equitable future for all learners.

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1.0 Introduction

Quality enhancement in education requires capability development of organizations, systems, services, stakeholders, and ecosystems. All these can undergo transformation for ensuring better quality through proper policy, strategy and implementation. As emphasised in National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) [1], quality improvement in education must meet, among others, the following challenges: (a) making education equitable, accessible and inclusive; (b) less content and more learning; (c) bridging the gap between current state of learning outcomes and global educational ecosystem; (d) developing pedagogy for making education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and enjoyable; (e) curriculum that develops all-round capabilities of learners; (f) teacher training; (g) quality content development; (h) assessment and self-assessment; (i) blended learning; (j) technology integration; (k) bridging the digital divide; (l) hardware and software deployment for achieving quality education that caters to socio-economic, cultural, and individual-specific needs like that of children with disabilities. In this article, we shall study the vision and mission of India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and its thrust on quality enhancement through the use of technology in the education sector, including special education.

The first education policy of the 21st century, NEP 2020 is based on the principles that "education is fundamental for *achieving* full human potential, *developing* an equitable and just society, and *promoting* national development" (Italics are added for emphasis) [1]. With the overarching goals of transforming India into a digitally empowered society and a knowledge economy, NEP 2020 emphasises the combination of education and technology to achieve these transformative goals. Digital technologies are the thrust areas in NEP 2020 and are deemed indispensable for improving the quality of outcome-based teaching-learning. The Policy envisages involvement of new and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), machine learning, 3D, block chains, robotics, handheld computing devices, smart boards, ICT tools, educational software and hardware to improve the quality of education and outcomes for all students—the abled as well as differently abled or children with disability [2].

The NEP 2020 puts in place the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) as responsible for creating a platform for free exchange of ideas on the utilization of technology to reinforce learning, assessment, planning, administration in education from foundational school level to postgraduate level. Entrusted with building proper infrastructure in educational technology and spearhead research and innovation for quality education, the NETF is responsible for deciding on the induction, deployment, and use of technology for ensuring equitable and inclusive education, with special considerations for quality education of children with disabilities. The thrust of NEP 2020 is leveraging with technological interventions for improving the quality of teaching-learning; assessment and evaluation processes [3]; teacher's learning and professional development; creation/development of quality €content; learner's

access to quality teaching-learning content and resources; educational planning, management and administration; processes of admission, attendance, and access.

NEP 2020 has tried to bank on technology for making the educational system both responsive and responsible. Thrust is given on making education equitable and inclusive and in doing so technology is recognized to be the critical factor. Arguably, special education has received special attention in NEP 2020, which envisions discernible improvement in the quality of special education through the use of disruptive technology. The challenges, however, are gigantic given that use of technology, which is pitted as solution, is itself a big challenge to overcome in a digitally divided Indian society. Having said that the map is not the territory, the fact remains that NEP 2020 is vigilant over the limitations as well as challenges technologies have and could produce and has initiated mechanisms to turn vision into reality.

While pitching for equitable and inclusive education for all, NEP 2020 has tried to overcome in principle the limitations of its predecessor Education Policy 1986 by focusing on inclusive education and the need to cater to the needs of children with disabilities (*Divyang* children). According to the UNESCO 2019 *State of the Education Report for India 2019: Children with Disabilities*, more than 20 million children with disability (physical, mental or sensory disability or multiple disabilities) in India aged five years, i.e., 75% of children with disabilities, do not attend any educational institution. In the scenario of only 9% of special kids being able to complete secondary education and 45% of persons with disability (PWD) remaining illiterate (*National Sample Survey 2018 Report*), special care and focus were needed for teaching-learning of children with disabilities. Besides, admission and education of children with disability have been a major challenge [4]. To revamp this kind of unsustainable education, the NEP 2020 advocates inclusive system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and be regular participants in the schooling process from KG to PG. The Policy encourages school education system to adopt solutions that are scalable, sustainable and effective so that all children get equal access to opportunities needed for leading a better life.

With the intention to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all," NEP 2020 accepts in spirit the UNESCO definition of inclusive education, i.e., 'as a process which is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers' of education and ensures the presence, participation, and achievement of all students and their diversities'. Several barriers like infrastructural, pedagogical, accessibility and affordability make education for children with disabilities difficult. NEP 2020 intends to lift the barriers to promote inclusive education. Keeping the challenge in mind, NEP 2020 has called for "a barrier-free access to education for all children with disabilities" by providing for the "children with benchmark disabilities" the choice of regular or special schooling as per the provisions laid in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 (RPWD Act, 2016). Benchmark disability means a person suffering at least 40% disability in any of the 21 listed disabilities in the RPWD Act 2016 (https://wecapable.com/disabilities-list-rpwd-act-2016/). To cut barriers out, digital technologies and ICT tools need to be used to aid teachers as well as facilitate teacher education, bridge language barriers between teachers and taught [5], create

digital libraries, and develop quality technology-based solutions to complex learning problems.

When a lot of changes are desired in the Special Education sector in India to meet the already neglected as well as growing needs in this field, priority has been given in NEP 2020 on the use of educational technologies for improving the quality of special education [6] by means of (i) quality educators and assistants for student-centric teaching, (ii) student-centric quality content, (iii) quality assessment and gradation for student's development, (iv) user-friendly, self-paced and autonomous learning, (v) development of ecosystem and infrastructural/logistics support, (vi) respectable and empathetic atmosphere and treatment, and (vii) facilitation of learning of children with specific and multiple disabilities through blended mode of teaching-learning. The NEP 2020 envisions increased use of educational technologies for ensuring and enhancing the ease of teaching-learning of the children with disabilities.

The National Education Policy 2020 is compatible with the RPWD Act 2016 and both take care of the provisions of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2006. The UNCRPD is based on eight principles: (1) Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons; (2) Non-discrimination; (3) Full and effective participation and inclusion in society; (4) Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity, (5) Equality of opportunity; (6) Accessibility; (7) Equality between men and women; and (8) Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities. The RPWD Act, which defines *disability* as "a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities," makes the provision of free education for each child with disability from age 6 to age 18. The Act increases the number of disabilities to 21: (1) Blindness, (2) Low-vision, (3) Leprosy-cured persons, (4) Hearing Impairment (deaf and hard of hearing), (5) Locomotor Disability, (6) Dwarfism, (7) Intellectual Disability, (8) Mental Illness, (9) Autism Spectrum Disorder, (10) Cerebral Palsy, (11) Muscular Dystrophy, (12) Chronic Neurological conditions, (13) Specific Learning Disabilities, (14) Multiple Sclerosis, (15) Speech and Language disability, (16) Thalassemia, (17) Hemophilia, (18) Sickle Cell disease, (19) Multiple Disabilities including deaf-blindness, (20) Acid Attack victim, (21) Parkinson's disease.

As we are all aware, children with disabilities suffered academic loss, loss in terms of social contact, and loss in terms of human resource development during the Covid-19 lockdown [7]. Especially children with disabilities hailing from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds suffered these losses more than their otherwise well-to-do counterparts. These difficulties, especially faced by children with specific difficulties, needed to be addressed by the NEP 2020. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment of Government of India recognized the need for making available to the special educational institutes with (i) assistive devices, (ii) appropriate technology-based tools, and (iii) language-appropriate teaching-learning materials. Although NEP 2020 remained silent on a common curriculum for children with

special needs, its vision to empower educational institutes with educational technology and instruments to address the special needs of special children with budgetary support is appreciable. NEP 2020 has emphasised on digital education, especially the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). It has highlighted the need of creating smart classrooms using AI. Smart classrooms will enable online interactions and collaborations with students from different schools across the globe [8], online assessments, apps with quizzes, and content that can nurture the students.

Notwithstanding the noble intentions of NEP 2020, the major challenges for making education inclusive and equitable for children with disabilities remain as formidable as before in the following domains: (1) Imparting knowledge and know-how to teach faculties on how to teach children with specific disabilities; (2) Providing barrier-free education to children with disabilities as per the RPWD Act 2016; (3) Staffing schools and resource centres with special teachers and trainers to cater to the various rehabilitation and educational needs of students with severe or multiple disabilities. Integration of children with disabilities remain a great challenge in the regular schooling process and imparting quality education to children with disabilities remains still a greater challenge. Even in the educational institutes specially meant for children with disabilities the challenge to impart quality education remains. Lack of adequately trained teachers in Special Education, shortage of adequate infrastructural/logistic facilities and teaching aids are some of the challenges NEP 2020 aims to tackle the situation by budgetary allocations and technological support. However, the challenge of imparting quality education, when all other challenges are satisfactorily addressed except provision of trained teachers, remains a matter of concern [9]. This article aims to discuss if artificial intelligence (AI) can help improve the quality of Special Education in India. However, before discussing the possibility of AI to turn over quality education to children with disabilities, a cursory look at RPWD Act 2016 will put the needs and expectations concerning quality in Special Education and the prospective role of AI in it.

In this article, we discuss the educational technologies envisioned by NEP 2020 to improve the quality of Special Education in India, especially meant for inclusive education, especially the teaching-learning of children with disabilities. We shall examine the technologies highlighted by NEP 2020 for improvement of quality of education concerning special education. However, we must not be oblivious of the fact that This study will assess the implementation of the technologies advocated by NEP 2020 on the ground, including the use of AI. Even though emerging and enabling technologies are progressively in use to improve the quality of teaching-learning, we will focus more on learning of children with disabilities, including the ones from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, in the integrated learning environments, including the mainstream educational institutions.

2.0 NEP 2020 and Digital Teaching-Learning for Inclusive Education

The Policy calls for investment in digital infrastructure, development of online teaching platforms and tools, creation of virtual labs and digital repositories, training teachers to become high quality online content creators, designing and implementing of online assessments, establishing standards for content, technology and pedagogy for online teaching-

learning. The Policy envisages the creation of a dedicated unit for the purpose of devising the development of digital infrastructure, digital content and capacity building to supervise the e-education needs of both school and higher education.

NEP 2020 has laid emphasis on digital learning for all students, including children with disability. Emphasis has been laid on effective use of technology for 360^0 teacher and student development by using digital technologies. NEP 2020 aims at enabling them for effective classroom teaching-learning, supporting teacher by enabling them in the use of educational technologies for student development and professional development, using learning management systems (LMS), enhancing e-content creation and development, achieving seamless assessment of students, ensuring evaluation-related support, conducting self-assessment by students, etc., through digital platforms. We will study how the vision of use of educational technology for quality enhancement in special education has been implemented practically in the ground.

National Educational Technology Forum (NETF)

NEP 2020 mandates that NETF shall operate as a platform for free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment planning and administration for school and higher education.

Among other tasks, NETF is responsible for:

- Development of good number of educational software
- Content development by NCERT, SWAYAM
- Supply of suitable equipment and devices to teachers to integrate e-contents

National Teacher's Portal

The National Teacher's Portal is a digital platform that shall contain all the e-content prepared by all the state boards, CBSE, NCERT, ICSE, ISC, and others. The content for the professional development of the teachers shall also be provided here.

The National Education Policy 2020 is all set to establish a digital India. Artificial Intelligence-based technologies will help in the development of most of the digital tools that can prove beneficial in the formation of a digitally literate country. The students will be aware of coding and 3D technologies from the basic levels. This will help them stand confidently in the technologically advanced world. India will soon be a leading knowledge hub of innovative technologies.

DIKSHA Platform

DIKSHA aims to empower teachers with access to high-quality teaching and learning resources, making it easier for them to create engaging lessons and improve the overall learning experience for students. The platform provides digital content in the form of interactive textbooks, videos, multimedia modules, lesson plans, assessment items, and more, which can be accessed by teachers and students across the country 10].

Key features of the DIKSHA platform include [1]:

Curriculum Aligned Content: The platform hosts a wide range of content that is aligned with various curricula and educational boards in India, including content for different subjects and grade levels.

Offline Access: DIKSHA allows users to download content for offline access, which is particularly beneficial for teachers and students in areas with limited or no internet connectivity.
QR Code-Based Content Distribution: The platform facilitates the distribution of digital content through QR codes, enabling teachers to share resources with their students easily.
Teacher Training: DIKSHA also provides teacher training modules to enhance the pedagogical skills of educators and improve their digital literacy.
Multilingual Support: The platform supports multiple Indian languages, making it accessible to a diverse population across the country.
Analytics and Insights: DIKSHA offers analytics and insights to track usage patterns, content engagement, and learning progress, helping teachers and administrators make data-driven decisions.

SWAYAM/NPTEL

SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) is an initiative by the Government of India that provides free online courses and study materials on various subjects at the school, undergraduate, and postgraduate levels. It aims to make quality education accessible to all, including students from remote areas and marginalized communities. SWAYAM offers courses from renowned institutions and faculties, allowing learners to study at their own pace and convenience. NPTEL (National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning) is an integral part of SWAYAM, specifically focusing on engineering, technology, and science subjects. NPTEL offers video lectures and course materials from IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) and IISc (Indian Institute of Science), enhancing the technical education landscape in the country. Learners can earn certificates for completed courses, and SWAYAM credits are recognized by academic institutions for degree programs [11].

SWAYAMPRABHA

SWAYAMPRABHA is an initiative under the Indian Government's SWAYAM platform that provides 24x7 free educational content through direct-to-home (DTH) television channels. It offers high-quality video lectures and course materials across various subjects, catering to learners at the school, undergraduate, postgraduate, and lifelong learning levels. SWAYAMPRABHA aims to reach students and individuals in remote areas with limited access to the internet, enabling them to access educational resources and benefit from the expertise of renowned faculty and institutions [12]. The initiative complements the online courses provided by SWAYAM, enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of digital education in India.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

NEP 2020 envisages to hinge on AI for creation of digital infrastructure; content creation, repository and dissemination; addressing digital divide; setting up of virtual labs. AI has had a tremendous impact on all industries and the Education sector is no exception! While it is enhancing the capacity of institutions and the abilities of teachers, it is also revolutionizing the way students learn [13].

Online assessment and examinations:

Appropriate bodies, like the proposed National Assessment Centre or PARAKH, School Boards, NTA, and other identified bodies will design and implement assessment frameworks. They will also design required competencies, portfolio, rubrics, standardized assessments, and assessment analytics.

Uses of AI

Task automation:

A growing number of learning management systems incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) to grade tests and manage administrative tasks like managing attendance, tracking reports, & delivering content. This saves a substantial amount of time for educators, so they can focus more on tailoring their curriculum to individual students' needs and less on busy work.

In this article, we will discuss the prospective role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in improving the quality of Special Education and the quality of life of the children with disabilities. In doing so, we will use three case studies of the use of AI in school education—one in India, one in the USA, and one in the UK—to find out if AI can help improve the quality of special education in India [14].

Personalized Learning

All students are unique and approach learning very differently. Instructors cannot always personalize their teaching strategies for an entire class, AI can be of great help. It can adjust to each student's knowledge level, pace, and desired goals to make sure they get the most out of their education. AI-enabled solutions can also analyze students' past learning histories, identify weaknesses, and suggest course correction activities.

SAFAL for Smart Grading and Assessment

In smart grading, students upload their assignments to the platform, and the platform sorts and groups answers and assign grades. AI reduces the time teachers spend grading by a great deal and provides detailed analytics of student performance.

Structured Assessment for Analysing Learning (SAFAL) is a competency-based assessment course for classes 3,5 and 8. It has also been introduced by CBSE. SAFAL intends to test the practical knowledge of students and their ability to apply it in everyday life. It aims to: (1) Assess the basic learning outcomes of students and their foundational skills, and (2) To improve both teaching and learning, it will also provide developmental feedback to schools and teachers. The SAFAL handbook gives more inputs on this scheme (http://cbseacademic.nic.in/web_material/Manuals/Safal_handbook.pdf).

'To track progress throughout the school years, and not just at the end of Grades 10 and 12 - for the benefit of students, parents, teachers, principals, and the entire schooling system in planning improvements to schools and teaching-learning processes - all students will take school examinations in Grades 3, 5, and 8 which will be conducted by the appropriate authority. These examinations would test achievement of basic learning outcomes, through assessment of core concepts and knowledge from the national and local curricula, along with relevant higher-order skills and application of knowledge in real-life situations, rather than rote memorization. The Grade 3 examination, in particular, would test basic literacy,

numeracy, and other foundational skills. The overall results of school examinations will be used only for developmental purposes of the school education system, including for public disclosure by schools of their overall (anonymized) student outcomes, and for continuous monitoring and improvement of the schooling system.'

Inclusive Learning Environment

Through AI, students can access course readings on different devices from anywhere, on a variety of platforms. AI helps to reduce barriers in learning by making information equally accessible to all learners by presenting the same content in varying materials.

AI for All

AI for All is an initiative that intends to create a basic understanding of Artificial Intelligence amongst every citizen of India. AI for All is a four-hour microlearning course. It is applicable to anyone from a parent to a professional. The course is divided into two sections which are AI awareness and AI apprehension.

AI awareness intends to provide elementary understanding to people about Artificial Intelligence. The course is for a duration of 1.5 hours. It also aims to cover the potentials and pitfalls of AI.

AI Appreciation aims to help learners have an introductory knowledge about the common areas of AI. It also intends to build personal plans. The course is for a duration of 2.5 hours.

The AI for All programme is driven by CBSE, Intel India, and the Ministry of Education. Those interested to access the course can check it https://ai-for-all.in/.

3.0 Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Special Education: An Overview

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Special Education is nothing new. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced in India, places significant emphasis on leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to transform the education landscape, including special education. This forward-thinking policy recognizes the potential of AI in addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities and aims to create a more inclusive and equitable educational system. AI technologies are seen as instrumental tools in implementing personalized learning approaches, which are crucial in catering to the unique requirements of students with special needs. By harnessing AI, the NEP 2020 strives to make special education more accessible and effective, ensuring that no student is left behind.

Within the NEP 2020 framework, AI-driven adaptive learning systems play a pivotal role in providing tailored educational content and interventions for students with disabilities. These systems can analyze individual learning patterns, assess strengths and weaknesses, and dynamically adjust coursework to suit each student's pace and abilities. Moreover, AI-powered assistive technologies, such as speech recognition and text-to-speech tools, are poised to enhance communication and accessibility for students with special needs, aligning with the policy's commitment to promoting inclusive education. By integrating AI into special education programs, the NEP 2020 seeks to empower both educators and students with the tools needed to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Furthermore, the NEP 2020 underscores the importance of AI in early diagnosis and intervention for learning disabilities and developmental disorders. By utilizing AI-based data

analytics and monitoring systems, educators can identify learning challenges in students at an earlier stage, facilitating timely and targeted support [15]. This proactive approach aligns with the policy's objective of promoting holistic development and fostering the well-being of all students. In essence, the integration of AI into special education under the NEP 2020 represents a transformative step towards a more inclusive, accessible, and technology-driven education system, ensuring that students with disabilities receive the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has emphasized the importance of inclusive education and ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, have access to quality education. The policy aims to ensure that children with special needs receive appropriate education, support, and resources to enable them to reach their full potential. NEP 2020 recognizes that students with disabilities require specialized support and individualized attention to ensure their educational success. The policy recommends the use of assistive technologies, special education teachers, and specialized curriculum materials to support students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. In addition, NEP 2020 calls for the establishment of resource centers for students with disabilities in all districts, to provide support and guidance to students, teachers, and parents. These centers will provide assessment, counseling, and training services to students with disabilities, and also serve as a hub for the development of assistive technologies and other resources.

NEP 2020 also emphasizes the need for teacher training in special education to enable them to better support students with disabilities. The policy calls for the development of specialized training programs for teachers, including pre-service and in-service training, to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to support students with disabilities effectively. Overall, NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of inclusive education and the need to ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate support and resources to enable them to reach their full potential.

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