



Education Policy Reform in South Asia: A Comparative Analysis of India's National Education Policy 2020 and Bhutan's National Education Policy 2024

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ABSTRACT

National education policies play a critical role in shaping equitable, future-ready, and culturally grounded education systems in an increasingly dynamic global context. This study employs a comparative qualitative deductive content analysis to examine India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Bhutan's National Education Policy (NEP) 2024, focusing on their philosophical foundations, educational structures, curriculum reforms, and assessment strategies. Bhutan's policy, guided by the Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, emphasises holistic development, sustainability, cultural identity, and values-based education, with a strong focus on localised implementation and learner well-being. In contrast, India's policy, rooted in constitutional values and Indian ethos, seeks to transform the education system to enhance global competitiveness, promote multilingualism, and achieve a hundred per cent Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2030 through a restructured 5+3+3+4 educational framework. Both policies prioritise inclusivity, equity, and competency-based learning. Curriculum reforms in both countries highlight experiential learning, digital literacy, and interdisciplinary approaches. However, Bhutan places comparatively greater emphasis on socio-emotional development and environmental sustainability, while India focuses more extensively on systemic transformation, research, and institutional reform. Assessment reforms in both contexts reflect a shift toward competency-based evaluation. Bhutan conducts national board examinations at Grades X and XII, administered by the Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment, as well as diagnostic national assessments at other levels. India, on the other hand, introduces comprehensive assessment reforms through frameworks such as PARAKH to standardise evaluation practices and promote holistic learner assessment. The study contributes to comparative education policy discourse by identifying key convergences and contextual differences between the two systems. It highlights opportunities for cross-national learning and suggests that future research should examine policy implementation, educational outcomes, and avenues for regional collaboration in strengthening education systems.

Keywords: *India's National Education Policy 2020, Bhutan's National Education Policy 2024, Comparative Policy Analysis, Qualitative Content Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Education policies serve as foundational frameworks that shape the structure, direction, and outcomes of national education systems. They influence key dimensions such as access, equity, curriculum design, governance, and assessment practices, thereby determining how effectively education contributes to social, economic, and cultural development. Well-formulated education policies not only respond to national priorities but also align with global educational goals, ensuring that learners are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values required for the twenty-first century. In this context, the design and implementation of education policies play a critical role in fostering inclusive, relevant, and sustainable education systems.

Within this broader context, both Bhutan and India recognise education as a central driver of national development and societal transformation. In Bhutan, the importance of a strong education system has been consistently emphasised in national discourse. His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (Fifth King), in his address at the third convocation of the Royal

University of Bhutan on February 17, 2009, stated:

We can dream of a nation of environmental conservation, Gross National Happiness (GNH), a strong economy, a vibrant democracy and yet none are possible or sustainable if we have not already toiled and sweated in the building of a strong education system.

Furthermore, in a Royal Kasho dated December 17, 2020, His Majesty the Fifth King emphasised the urgency of educational transformation:

We have a sacred duty to fundamentally reshape our educational system, including its curriculum, infrastructure, classrooms, and assessment methods. As we progress into the twenty-first century, our learners need to become critical and creative thinkers, curious problem-solvers, and skilled collaborators who are comfortable with technology. Education should inspire self-discovery and exploration, empowering children to become knowledge creators rather than just passive recipients.

The Chairperson of the National Education Policy 2020, Dr. K. Kasturirangan, remarked that The vision of India's new educational system has been crafted to ensure that it touches the lives of every citizen, consistent with their needs and necessities, besides creating a just and equitable society.

The growth of any society fundamentally depends on the strength of its education system, which is a crucial means of breaking the cycle of poverty, disadvantage, and disempowerment (Wangdi & Boossabong, 2024). Education has been essential to shaping the country's social, economic, political, cultural, intellectual, and environmental development, helping to define its character as a peaceful, forward-looking, and contented nation (Ministry of Education and Skills Development, 2014). Ensuring universal access to quality education is essential for India's sustained development and for its emergence as a global leader in economic progress, social justice, equality, scientific innovation, national integration, and cultural preservation (Ministry of Education, 2020). In response to their respective societal and national needs, both India and Bhutan have introduced new National Education Policies to strengthen and reform their educational systems.

India is a large, geographically diverse country with extensive plains, deserts, and the Himalayan Mountain range. Bhutan, a small, landlocked kingdom in the Himalayas, is almost entirely mountainous. India's socio-economic landscape features rapid economic growth alongside persistent poverty and inequality in the education sector (Schmidt, 2017; Jan & Faiz, 2025). Its economy is driven by agriculture, industry, and services, yet significant disparities in wealth and access to resources persist. By contrast, Bhutan emphasises Gross National Happiness (GNH) over purely economic indicators, prioritising sustainable development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation (Brooks, 2013; Thinley & Hartz-Karp, 2019). Its economy relies on hydropower, agriculture, and tourism.

Comparing the education systems of India and Bhutan provides valuable insights into how geographical, socio-economic, and cultural factors shape educational development and outcomes. India's education system, while vast and diverse, grapples with issues of access, quality, and equity (Verma & Dorzi, 2014). Bhutan, despite its limited resources, has made strides in expanding access to education, focusing on holistic development and aligning education with its GNH philosophy (Malik, 2019). A comparative analysis can reveal lessons for fostering inclusive, relevant, and sustainable educational practices tailored to specific regional needs and developmental goals. Therefore, the main aim of the study is to employ comparative content analysis to investigate the national education policies, Bhutan's National Education Policy (NEP) 2024 and India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, focusing on their philosophical foundations, educational structures, curriculum reforms, and assessment strategies.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Education policy can be understood as a framework of guiding principles and strategic decisions that shape the organisation, governance, and delivery of education systems. It influences how educational opportunities are structured, resourced, and evaluated across different contexts. Scholars emphasise that effective education policies are central to promoting equitable access, enhancing quality, encouraging innovation, and aligning education with broader socio-economic and cultural goals (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Well-developed policy frameworks typically incorporate coherent philosophical orientations, clearly defined system structures, relevant and flexible curricula, and comprehensive assessment mechanisms that support meaningful learning outcomes.

Research on policy implementation further suggests that the effectiveness of education policies depends not only on their design but also on the processes through which they are enacted, including stakeholder engagement, institutional capacity, and alignment between policy goals and practice (Viennet & Pont, 2017; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2017). Comparative studies of high-performing education systems indicate that countries such as Finland and Singapore have achieved strong educational outcomes by maintaining coherent, well-aligned policy frameworks that balance quality, equity, and adaptability to changing societal demands (OECD, 2012; OECD, 2019).

Within education policy research, several key dimensions are widely recognised as central to the analysis of policy design and effectiveness. First, philosophical foundations reflect the values, ideologies, and national priorities that guide an education system. According to Ball (1994), education policies are not neutral but are shaped by political, cultural, and ideological contexts. Similarly, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue that education policies are increasingly influenced by globalisation while still reflecting local socio-cultural priorities. These philosophical orientations determine how systems balance equity, identity, and global competitiveness.

Second, educational structures refer to the organisation and governance of education systems, including stages of schooling, institutional arrangements, and access pathways. Research by the OECD (2015) highlights that coherent structural design contributes to system efficiency, participation, and progression across educational levels. Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2017) emphasises that well-structured systems are essential for achieving equitable access and lifelong learning opportunities.

Third, curriculum is a central component of education policy, defining the knowledge, skills, and competencies that learners are expected to acquire. Contemporary researchers highlight a global curriculum shift towards competency-based, learner-centred, and interdisciplinary approaches. Voogt and Roblin (2012) noted that 21st-century curricula increasingly emphasise critical thinking, digital literacy, and problem-solving

skills. Similarly, the OECD (2018) Education 2030 framework underscores the importance of preparing learners for complex and rapidly changing global environments.

Fourth, assessment strategies play a crucial role in shaping teaching and learning practices. Formative and competency-based assessment approaches are increasingly complementing traditional high-stakes examinations. Research by Black and Wiliam (1998) demonstrates that formative assessment significantly improves learning outcomes. In addition, the OECD (2013) emphasises that balanced assessment systems are essential for improving both quality and equity in education. These dimensions, philosophical foundations, educational structures, curriculum reforms, and assessment strategies provide a coherent analytical framework for examining education policies and are widely supported in the literature.

Within this broader conceptual context, both India's and Bhutan's current national education policies place a strong emphasis on holistic development, inclusivity, and equitable learning opportunities. A review of existing comparative studies, however, reveals notable gaps in the literature. For instance, Sarkar and Sarkar (2018) examined environmental education in both countries, focusing on curriculum objectives, content, pedagogy, and evaluation. While their study demonstrated a shared commitment to environmental education, it also identified structural weaknesses in implementation and evaluation processes. Htun (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of Human Development Index (HDI) trends between 2012 and 2021, finding that although India initially reported higher HDI values, Bhutan surpassed India after 2016, with both countries remaining in the medium human development category. Dorji (2014) compared secondary teacher education curricula at the Royal University of Bhutan and the University of Pune, India, and found limited responsiveness to contemporary educational demands, with some strengths in the Indian context regarding teacher roles and technology use. Additionally, Malik (2019) analysed the National Education Policies of India and Bhutan using Walt and Gilson's (1994) health policy triangle and Bacchi's (2009) problem-representation framework, offering insights into stakeholder power dynamics and policy silences.

While these comparative studies have contributed valuable insights into health policy, teacher education, environmental sustainability, and development indicators, there is an apparent lack of research focused on the recent national education policies of the Indian NEP (2020) and Bhutan NEP (2024). This study addresses that gap by conducting a comparative policy analysis of these two landmark documents. The analysis is guided by four key dimensions: philosophical foundations, educational structures, curriculum reforms, and assessment strategies, which are derived from and aligned with established education policy and policy analysis literature that emphasises the importance of policy vision, system design, pedagogical content, and evaluation mechanisms in understanding policy effectiveness (Viennet & Pont, 2017; OECD, 2017; Ball, 1994). Collectively, this study points to the need for further research on how national

education policies can more effectively address contemporary educational challenges and context-specific needs in both India and Bhutan.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to examine India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and Bhutan's National Education Policy (NEP 2024), with official policy documents serving as the primary data sources. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic method for interpreting textual data by identifying themes and patterns (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach is particularly suitable for policy analysis, as it enables the structured examination of policy documents and their underlying meanings. Given that the study aims to compare two national education policies, this method enables both descriptive and interpretive analysis of policy content while ensuring consistency and comparability. Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows for the capture of context-specific nuances.

A deductive content analysis approach was adopted, in which categories were informed by existing theoretical and policy literature (Fife & Gossner, 2024). This approach allows for a theory-driven analysis while maintaining consistency and comparability across cases. The analysis was guided by four thematic categories: philosophical foundations, educational structures, curriculum reforms, and assessment strategies. These themes were derived from a preliminary reading of the documents and were informed by relevant literature on policy analysis. The coding and theme development were carried out manually by the two authors through iterative reading, discussion, and consensus-building to ensure consistency and analytical rigour. Two independent coders analysed the data, and inter-coder reliability was assessed using percentage agreement, yielding eighty-eight per cent, which meets recommended standards (Stemler, 2001). In addition, intra-coder reliability checks were conducted to ensure consistency in coding over time. To guide the analysis, the study is structured around the following research questions (RQ):

1. What are the philosophical foundations guiding the national education policies of India's National Education Policy (2020) and Bhutan's National Education Policy (2024), and how do they reflect each country's cultural and developmental priorities?
2. What is the distribution of references to different levels of education in the National Education Policy (2020) of India and the National Education Policy (2024) of Bhutan?
3. How are curriculum reforms conceptualised and proposed for implementation in NEP (2020) and NEP (2024)?
4. In what ways do NEP (2024) and NEP (2020) differ or converge in their approaches to student assessment?

RESULTS

RQ 1. What are the philosophical foundations guiding the national education policies of India's NEP (2020) and Bhutan's NEP (2024), and how do they reflect each country's cultural and

developmental priorities?

I. Bhutan's National Education Policy (2024)

a) Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical foundations that guide Bhutan's National Education Policy (2024) are deeply rooted in the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH), Buddhist values, and the nation's unique cultural identity. These foundations emphasise holistic development, moral and ethical growth, sustainability, and cultural preservation. The policy explicitly states that "GNH shall be the guiding framework for education," aiming to foster comprehensive learner development, sustainability, equity, and ethical citizenship (Ministry of Education and Skills Development, 2024, p. 4).

His Majesty's decree highlights a significant shift from rote learning to pedagogical approaches that encourage critical thinking, creative thinking, lifelong learning, problem-solving, and collaboration (MoESD, 2024, p. 1). The policy vision seeks to harmonise academic excellence with holistic well-being, cultural identity, and sustainable citizenship (MoESD, 2024, p. 3). Furthermore, it promotes core values that encompass social, emotional, ethical, cultural, and personal growth (MoESD, 2024, p. 3). It also ensures "access to quality, inclusive education" that meets diverse learning needs, including those of individuals with disabilities (MoESD, 2024, p. 3).

b) Reflection of Cultural & Developmental Priorities

Upholds cultural preservation through *thad dam tshig las 'gyur 'bras* (sacred commitment and karmic responsibility). Focuses on sustainable development and climate resilience, embedding environmental stewardship into all education levels. Prepares learners for a globalised, technology-driven world while reinforcing Bhutanese unity and identity.

II. India's National Education Policy (2020)

a) Philosophical Foundations

The NEP (2020) is "rooted in Indian ethos" and aims to develop an education system that sustains India as "a global knowledge superpower" while preserving ancient traditions (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 6). It draws on "ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought" and highlights institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila as role models of multidisciplinary learning (MoE, 2020, p. 4). The goal is for India to develop an education system by 2040 that is second to none, ensuring equitable access to top-quality education for all learners, regardless of their social or economic background (MoE, 2020, p. 3). This National Education Policy (2020) represents the inaugural educational policy of the twenty-first century, intending to address the numerous developmental imperatives of our nation. (MoE, p. 3). The policy emphasises "full equity and inclusion" in educational decision-making to ensure all students thrive, especially marginalised groups (MoE, p. 5). India's NEP (2020) aligns with SDG 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education," and promotes lifelong learning by

2030 (MoE, p. 3).

b) Reflection of Cultural & Developmental Priorities

- Preserves Indian cultural heritage (languages, arts, traditions) while integrating modern disciplines such as AI, machine learning, and environmental education.
- Addresses demographic dividend by preparing the largest youth population for a dynamic global economy.
- Strengthens national unity through respect for diversity and constitutional values Positions India as a research and innovation hub through emphasis on multidisciplinary and critical thinking approaches.

RQ 2. What is the distribution of references to different levels of education (e.g., early childhood, primary, secondary, and higher education) in India's NEP (2020) and Bhutan's NEP (2024)?

In this section, we examine the distribution of references to different levels of education (e.g., early childhood, primary, secondary, and higher education) in the national education policies of NEP (2020) and NEP (2024). We analysed both policies appropriately to establish the table and theme (see Tables 2 and 3).

I. Bhutan's National Education Policy (2024)

a) Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)

The policy defines early childhood as ages 0 - 8 years, with a strong emphasis on holistic development. It highlights ECCD as foundational for lifelong learning and integral to Bhutan's vision of Gross National Happiness (MoESD, 2024, p. 7). ECCD services should be universal, accessible, and inclusive, ensuring that all children, including those with special needs, receive age-appropriate care and education. Parental engagement is a central principle, with the policy requiring ECCD programmes to "support parents and caregivers with knowledge and skills to nurture children's development" (MoESD, 2024, p. 8). Infrastructure standards are also specified, including safe learning spaces, hygiene, and access to outdoor play areas. The teacher preparation framework calls for specialised ECCD training, with a clear pathway for professional development. The government commits to integrating ECCD services with the health, nutrition, and protection sectors to provide comprehensive support (MoESD, 2024, p. 9).

b) Primary Education

Primary education begins at age 6, aligning with the ECCD continuum (p. 9). The NEP (2024) mandates free education for all Bhutanese children up to Grade XII to maintain proximity between home and school, especially in rural areas, and to avoid boarding at an early age. The curriculum will integrate literacy, numeracy, life skills, and cultural values, while also fostering creativity and problem-solving skills. A cluster school model is proposed to improve resource allocation and teaching quality across primary levels (MoESD, 2024, p. 10). Inclusivity is reaffirmed, ensuring that primary schools adapt to diverse learning needs and remove barriers to participation.

Table 1: Cross-Country Thematic Coding – Philosophical Foundations and Priorities

Theme (Code)	India NEP 2020	Bhutan NEP 2024
Cultural Heritage as Foundation	“Rooted in Indian ethos, ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought” (p. 4, p. 6)	“Empowering 21st century learning rooted in Bhutanese values of <i>tha dam-tsig ley gju-drey</i> ” (p. 3)
Holistic Human Development	“Develop cognitive, social, ethical, and emotional capacities” (p. 4)	“Harmonising academic excellence with holistic well-being” (p. 3)
Equity and Inclusion	“Full equity and inclusion as the cornerstone” (p. 5)	“Ensure all have access to quality, inclusive education” (p. 3)
Sustainability Orientation	“Responsible commitment to sustainable development and global well-being” (p. 6)	“Educate on climate change, sustainability, and green economy” (p. 3)
Global Alignment	“Aligned with SDG4 lifelong learning for all by 2030” (p. 3)	“Guided by SDGs sustainable citizenship” (p. 4)
Pedagogical Approach	“Multidisciplinary inquiry-based... experiential” (p. 5)	“Self-discovery and exploration, creation of knowledge” (p. 1)
Developmental Priority	“Transform India into a global knowledge superpower” (p. 6)	“Resilient, disaster-proof education system, sustainable resource use” (p. 5)

Table 2: Distribution of References to Various Education Levels

Theme	Page Numbers	Approx. Share of Education-Level References
Early Childhood Care & Development (ECCD)	pp. 7–9: Detailed definition of early childhood (0–8 years), ECCD standards, parental involvement, inclusion, teacher training, infrastructure.	~18%
Primary Education	pp. 9–10: Pre-primary entry age (6 years), curriculum, free education provision, cluster school model from ECCD to Grade XII, keeping young children close to home.	~14%
Secondary Education	pp. 9–11: Structure from Grade VII–XII, specialised secondary schools, STEM/arts/sports integration, infrastructure and safety standards, boarding/central schools.	~16%
Higher Education	pp. 19–20: Access based on merit, alignment with Bhutan Qualifications Framework, institutional autonomy, quality assurance.	~10%
TVET (Technical & Vocational Education)	pp. 16–18: Industry linkages, curriculum adaptation, incubation centres, entrepreneurship.	~8%
Lifelong Learning / Literacy	pp. 21–22: Adult education, skills for green economy, community-based learning.	~6%

c) Secondary Education

Secondary education (Grades VII–XII) is designed to provide broad academic preparation, along with opportunities for specialisation in the arts, sciences, and vocational tracks. The policy promotes specialised secondary schools in areas such as STEM, the arts, and sports (MoESD, 2024, p. 11). Infrastructure standards, including disaster resilience, safe boarding facilities, and inclusive access, are mandated for secondary schools. The

curriculum aims to balance academic content with 21st-century skills, including collaboration, critical thinking, and digital literacy.

d) Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

TVET is prioritised as a pathway for both secondary and post-secondary learners. The policy promotes industry-linked programmes, curriculum adaptation to labour market needs,

and the establishment of incubation centres for entrepreneurship (MoESD, 2024, p. 16). TVET institutions are expected to partner with local and international industries for skill development, apprenticeships, and job placements (MoESD, 2024, p. 17). The vision is to transform the perception of TVET from a fallback option to a first-choice career path.

e) Lifelong Learning and Adult Education

The NEP (2024) commits to expanding lifelong learning opportunities through community-based programmes, digital platforms, and skills training for adults (MoESD, 2024, p. 21). Literacy programmes for out-of-school youth and adults are targeted to ensure no Bhutanese are left behind in acquiring basic competencies (pp. 21-22). Skills for the green economy, climate adaptation, and entrepreneurship are embedded into lifelong learning curricula (MoESD, 2024, p. 22).

II. India's National Education Policy (2020)

a) Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE / Foundational Stage)

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (ages 0-8) is treated as foundational and a national priority; the NEP (2020) identifies the early years as critical for brain development and learning readiness. NEP (2020) proposes a National Curricular & Pedagogical Framework for ECCE (NCPFECCE) with sub-frameworks for 0-3 and 3-8-year-olds. The framework will incorporate local traditions (stories, songs, plays). Universal access target: phased universal provisioning of high-quality ECCE goal by 2030 for school readiness.

b) Primary Education (Foundational & Preparatory stages; Grades 1-5)

Main emphases: Foundational literacy & numeracy (FLN) by Grade 3 is the highest priority and a national mission (explicit targets and timelines). National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (NIPUN) to achieve universal FLN by Grade 3; states must prepare implementation plans with stage-wise targets. PTR targets (under 30:1 typical; under 25:1 for disadvantaged areas) and hiring to fill teacher vacancies to support FLN. Emphasis on mother-tongue / home language instruction at least until Grade 5 (preferably Grade 8) and bilingual materials for science/maths. NEP (2020) treats primary education as the stage at which foundational skills must be firmly established; the policy links teacher quality, language policy, reduced curricula, and expanded ECCE to this goal.

c) Secondary Education (Middle & Secondary stages; Grades 6-12)

Main emphases: Structural reconfiguration to 5+3+3+4 (Middle: 6-8; Secondary: 9-12) with multidisciplinary, flexibility, and student choice in secondary school. Secondary stage to offer greater depth, critical thinking, elective choices, and options to exit/enter at Grade 10 or continue to Grade 11-12. No rigid separation between curricular and vocational streams; vocational education integrated from Grade 6 onwards. Semester or modular systems suggested to allow exposure to more subjects; emphasis on experiential, arts- and sports-integrated pedagogy. Move from summative, exam-centric culture to a formative “assessment for learning” and multiple exit/entry pathways. Secondary education

Table 3: Distribution of References to Various Education Levels

Theme	Page Numbers	Approx. Share of Education-Level References
Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE)	pp. 7–8, 12–14: Foundational stage (ages 3–8); integration of Anganwadi and preschools; play-based pedagogy; NCERT Early Childhood Curriculum.	~15%
Primary Education	pp. 8–9, 15–17: Foundational & preparatory stages (Grades 1–5), focus on literacy & numeracy (NIPUN Bharat), multilingual education, continuous assessment.	~18%
Secondary Education	pp. 9–10, 18–22: Middle & secondary stages (Grades 6–12), vocational exposure, multidisciplinary curriculum, life skills, flexible subject choices.	~20%
Higher Education	pp. 33–52: Large coverage on multidisciplinary universities, credit transfer, National Higher Education Qualifications Framework, GER targets, and institutional governance.	~25%
Vocational Education	pp. 22–25: Integrated from Grade 6 onward, hands-on training, internships, industry partnerships.	~8%
Adult Education / Lifelong Learning	pp. 26–28: Flexible learning opportunities, literacy missions, technology-enabled learning.	~5%

is presented as the pivot to specialisation and career orientation while preserving breadth. NEP's reforms aim to reduce early streaming and open vocational/academic mobility.

d) Higher Education

Major, detailed overhaul of higher education (most extensive single policy section), emphasis on multidisciplinary, autonomy, quality, research, and governance. Reorganise HEIs into prominent, multidisciplinary universities/colleges; create a Higher Education Commission of India (single regulator with multiple verticals) and a National Higher Education Qualifications Framework. Institutional restructuring, consolidation, and alternative governance for federated/affiliating models; greater institutional autonomy for teaching, staffing, and finance. Emphasis on research: National Research Foundation (NRF) to fund and catalyse research across disciplines. Credit system, multiple entry/exits with certificates/diplomas/degrees, multidisciplinary undergraduate degrees (flexible four-year bachelor's with exit options). Equity & inclusion measures, teacher/faculty career pathways, incentives for research and teaching excellence. NEP (2020) contains elaborate institutional and regulatory redesigns intended to transform India into a knowledge society. This is the policy's most detailed and prescriptive section.

e) Vocational Education / TVET

Vocational education is mainstreamed and made a first-choice option rather than a fallback; integration begins at Grade 6 and continues through secondary and higher stages. Reimagining vocational education: modular courses, internships, industry partnerships, and credit recognition within the formal system. Strengthening institutions (polytechnics, ITIs) and aligning TVET with industry needs and quality assurance. NEP (2020) positions TVET as cross-cutting: embedded early in schooling, linked to higher education via credits and apprenticeships, and central to employability goals.

f) Adult Education & Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning and adult literacy are recognised as essential; the NEP (2020) advocates expanding Open & Distance Learning (ODL), strengthening NIOS, and expanding adult literacy programmes. Expand NIOS and State Open Schools with levels equivalent to Grades 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, along with vocational courses and life-enrichment programmes. Promote digital libraries, DIKSHA, and technology-mediated lifelong learning platforms. NEP (2020) integrates lifelong learning into the national system, with clear plans for ODL expansion and adult services, but operational details are less specific than those for higher education.

RQ 3. How are curriculum reforms conceptualised and proposed for implementation in NEP (2020) and NEP (2024)?

In this section, we explore the concepts and implementation strategies of curriculum reform as proposed by India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Bhutan's National Education

Policy (NEP) 2024. We will provide a comprehensive analysis of the key components of their respective curricula, illustrating the significant reforms highlighted in both national education policies. A detailed comparison is presented in Table 4, which outlines the primary curriculum elements referenced by both countries and highlights their approaches to educational enhancement and innovation.

India's National Education Policy (2020): curriculum reform conception and implementation

National Education Policy reframes the aim of education as moving "towards real understanding" and "learning how to learn," reducing rote learning and building character and 21st-century skills (e.g., critical thinking, creativity) (p. 12). Content is pared to "core essentials" to create space for inquiry, discovery, and analysis, with interactive classrooms (p. 12). A curricular-pedagogic architecture, Foundational, Preparatory, Middle, Secondary, aligned to child development; it informs curricula and teaching, not infrastructure (pp. 12-13), and enables flexible exits/re-entries at Secondary (p. 12). Mother-tongue/ home-language medium in early years with strong multilingual proficiency to deepen conceptual learning (pp. 13-14). National

FLN Mission "highest priority"; universal FLN by Grade 3 and by 2025; DIKSHA resources; teacher recruitment/CPD; peer tutoring, volunteers (pp. 9-10). NCERT to craft NCF for school education; States align via SCERTs/textbooks (p. 18; also, textbook availability & lightening schoolbag at pp. 17-18) to operationalise the new pedagogy (pp. 17-18). PARAKH and Boards to realign by 2022-23 to NCFSE 2020-21; Grade-band exams instituted (pp. 19-20). DIKSHA to host high-quality resources that support teacher practice and curricular rollout (pp. 9-10). India conceptualises curriculum reform as system-wide pedagogy + assessment realignment, sequenced from FLN → competency-based pedagogy → flexible assessment supported by national institutions (NCERT, PARAKH, NTA) and digital infrastructure, so implementation is heavily scaffolded by standard-setting bodies and frameworks.

Bhutan's National Education Policy (2024): curriculum reform conception and implementation

The curriculum is designed to deliver holistic development grounded in Bhutanese values/GNH and to prepare learners for a rapidly changing world, with an explicit competency-based orientation (pp. 6-7; 13-14). Updated national curriculum framework to embed cross-cutting competencies (digital, financial, media literacy, problem solving, wellbeing) (pp. 13-15). Dzongkha and English as core languages, with additional language opportunities to balance identity and global access (pp. 15-16). The policy reorganises upper schooling into specialised secondary schools (STEM, TVET, arts/humanities) to align with learners' interests and labour-market needs (pp. 11-12). Emphasis on student-centred, active learning (project-, inquiry-, and problem-based), aligned to competencies and contextualised to Bhutan's culture and environment (pp. 13-14). Curriculum accompanied by inclusive education measures (reasonable accommodations, targeted support for remote/rural

Table 4: Curriculum reform conception and implementation

Theme	India's NEP 2020	Bhutan's NEP 2024
Curricular vision	Holistic, 21st-century skills-oriented education; shift from rote learning to “learning how to learn” (p. 12).	Holistic, future-ready education grounded in national values and Gross National Happiness (GNH); competency-based learning (pp. 6–7).
Structure of schooling	5+3+3+4 structure (Foundational–Preparatory–Middle–Secondary) designed for curriculum and pedagogy reform (pp. 12–13).	Consolidated basic education followed by specialised secondary schooling with pathways/streams; updated national curriculum framework (pp. 11–12).
Curriculum content	Reduction to “core essentials” to create space for inquiry, critical thinking, and analysis (p. 12).	Streamlined, competency-based standards with emphasis on cross-cutting skills (pp. 13–14).
Pedagogy	Experiential, inquiry-based learning; integration of arts and sports; competency-based classroom transactions (p. 13).	Student-centred, active learning approaches, including project- and problem-based learning across subjects (pp. 13–14).
Cross-curricular skills & new subjects	Introduction of AI, design thinking, and computational thinking; emphasis on ethics, citizenship, and environmental education (pp. 16–17).	Digital and financial literacy, coding, and media literacy; wellbeing and values embedded across the curriculum (pp. 13–15).
Language policy	Mother-tongue/home-language as medium of instruction in early grades; strong emphasis on multilingualism (pp. 13–14).	Trilingual approach (Dzongkha, English, and additional languages) to promote cultural identity and equitable access (pp. 15–16).
Vocational & life-skills education	Hands-on vocational exposure in Grades 6–8; internships; “bagless days” for experiential learning (pp. 16–17).	Strong school-to-work linkages, entrepreneurship education, and career guidance; alignment with Bhutan Qualifications Framework (BQF) (pp. 15, 27).
Assessment reform	Shift towards formative and competency-based assessment; holistic 360° progress card; PARAKH; flexible board exams and grade-band assessments (pp. 18–20).	Balanced formative–summative assessment system; national standard-setting assessments to monitor competency attainment (pp. 15–16).
Inclusion	Indian Sign Language standardisation; Universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) mission; equity through arts and sports integration (pp. 9–10, 13, 16).	Inclusive curriculum and assessment accommodations; targeted support for remote and rural learners (pp. 16–17).
Implementation levers	National and State Curriculum Frameworks; NCERT/SCERT leadership; PARAKH, NTA, DIKSHA; phased and guideline-driven implementation (pp. 9–10, 18–20).	Phased implementation with clearly defined responsibilities; specialised secondary schools; cluster-based model; teacher upskilling; timelines extending to 2030 (pp. 11–12, 18–19, 27).

learners, disability-responsive teaching–learning materials) to secure equitable outcomes (pp. 16–17). Bhutan conceptualises reform as a competency-based, values-rooted redesign with structural differentiation at secondary (specialised schools) and whole-system alignment (assessment, BQF, teacher upskilling), sequenced through explicit phases and timelines.

RQ 4. In what ways do NEP (2024) and NEP (2020) differ or converge in their approaches to student assessment?

In this section, we examine how both policies articulate their assessment strategies, with a focus on fostering students' holistic development and achieving meaningful learning outcomes.

Bhutan's National Education Policy (2024):

Assessment is explicitly part of curriculum design, with

a move away from “retention and recall” towards competency-based assessment that evaluates understanding and real-world application (7.22). This reframes exams as measures of proficiency in applying knowledge rather than merely remembering facts (p. 15). School-level assessment is designed to identify strengths and weaknesses in a child's overall development, enabling teachers to tailor educational programs to meet curriculum goals (7.23, p. 16). Nationally, assessments are feedback tools to guide curriculum revision, teacher professional development, and resource allocation (7.24, p. 16). The Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA) conducts National Education Assessments and Board Examinations at the end of Grade X and Grade XII, and at other levels as determined by the Ministry (7.25, p. 16). Bhutan introduces a targeted re-sit

opportunity for students who narrowly fail one compulsory subject, contingent on strong performance in the other two compulsory subjects. This equity-minded safety net maintains

standards (7.26, p. 16). BCSEA will continually develop tools and capacity, collaborate with international assessment boards, and Bhutan will regularly participate in international assessments (7.27-7.29, p. 16).

I. India's National Education Policy (2020)

India's National Education Policy (2020) recasts the aim of assessment from summative/rote to regular, formative, competency-based processes, emphasising analysis, critical thinking, and conceptual clarity; assessment is primarily for learning (4.34, p. 18). A redesigned 360-degree progress card captures cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development; includes self- and peer-assessments, project- and inquiry-based evidence; and envisions AI-based tools to help students/parents/teachers track growth and plan careers (4.35, p. 18). Board exams continue but are redesigned to test core competencies rather than coaching; allow subject choice; enable two attempts per year and explore modular exams, two difficulty levels, and objective and descriptive formats (4.36-4.39, pp. 18-19). All students will take school examinations in Grades 3, 5, and 8 to monitor foundational and core outcomes; results are for developmental purposes only and for anonymised public disclosure to drive system improvement (4.40, p. 19). Establish PARAKH to set norms/standards for student assessment across boards, guide NAS/SAS, and support the shift to 21st-century competencies and equivalence across boards (4.41, p. 19). NTA to run common aptitude and subject tests twice yearly, aiming to reduce coaching, improve flexibility, and lessen duplication across universities (4.42, p. 19). NAS (sample-based) and State SAS provide periodic, transparent diagnostics of learning levels across public and private schools (8.10, p. 33).

DISCUSSION

This comparative analysis of India's NEP (2020) and Bhutan's NEP (2024) illustrates how both countries are actively engaged in educational reforms that reflect their unique cultural, socio-economic, and developmental contexts, while also aligning with global objectives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Bhutan's NEP (2024) is deeply rooted in the GNH framework, which integrates Buddhist principles, environmental care, and cultural preservation into its educational aims. This approach aligns with emerging global trends that prioritise socio-emotional learning and student well-being, as seen in systems such as Finland, where education emphasises equity, trust, and holistic development (OECD, 2019). India's NEP (2020), while also promoting holistic development, places stronger emphasis on positioning the country as a global knowledge economy. This reflects policy orientations found in countries such as Singapore, where education systems are designed to balance national identity with global competitiveness

and innovation (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In terms of educational frameworks, both policies emphasise comprehensive access to all levels of education. However, Bhutan places greater emphasis on early childhood development and community-based lifelong learning, whereas India focuses heavily on reforms in higher education, research infrastructure, and governance. Curriculum reforms in both nations are shifting away from rote memorisation toward more engaging, inquiry-based, and competency-driven approaches. Bhutan's curriculum closely aligns with national identity and environmental awareness, whereas India's framework incorporates advanced skills, technology integration, and adaptable learning pathways, embodied in the 5+3+3+4 structure. Vocational education is a priority in both policies, with Bhutan striving to position Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a preferred pathway through industry partnerships and entrepreneurial initiatives. In contrast, India introduces vocational exposure as early as Grade 6, linking it to higher education through credit frameworks. With respect to assessment strategies, both policies signal a shift away from rote memorisation towards competency-based and formative assessment approaches. This aligns with international evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of formative assessment in improving learning outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998). India's introduction of frameworks such as PARAKH and flexible board examinations reflects global practices aimed at reducing exam pressure and enhancing assessment validity. Bhutan's balanced approach, combining national board examinations with diagnostic assessments, is consistent with OECD recommendations for integrated assessment systems that support both accountability and learning (OECD, 2013).

Overall, these insights suggest that while Bhutan's policy embodies a values-centred, sustainability-driven vision, India's strategy adopts a comprehensive approach to systemic transformation through governance, technology, and international competitiveness. Both nations face common challenges in ensuring equitable access in rural and underserved regions, providing adequate teacher training, and aligning implementation capacity with ambitious policy aspirations.

A mutual exchange of insights between these two approaches can enrich both systems and contribute to a more just and inclusive society. Bhutan's NEP (2024) embeds Gross National Happiness (GNH), well-being, and values as central curriculum outcomes (MoESD, 2024, p. 6-7). India could strengthen its own emphasis on socio-emotional learning by adopting Bhutan's holistic, happiness-oriented perspective, ensuring that education produces not only skilled but also ethically grounded citizens. Bhutan's reorganisation of upper secondary education into specialised schools (STEM, humanities, TVET) (MoESD, 2024, p. 11-12) could inform India's large and diverse system by offering clearer career pathways and reducing academic-vocational hierarchies. Bhutan's commitment to participating in international assessments to calibrate national standards (MoESD, 2024, p. 16) is a practice that India could expand to

Table 5: Summary of Assessment Strategies

Theme	Bhutan NEP 2024	India NEP 2020
Overall purpose of the assessment	Shift from recall to competency-based evaluation of understanding and real-world application; assessment is part of curriculum design (pp. 15–16).	Shift from summative/rote to regular, formative, competency-based assessment focused on higher-order skills (p. 18).
Formative, whole-child reporting	School-level assessment to diagnose strengths/weaknesses and personalise learning (p. 16).	Holistic 360° progress card with self/peer assessment; links home–school; potential AI-based tracking (p. 18).
Periodic large-scale checks	National assessments led by BCSEA; participation in international assessments (p. 16).	NAS (sample-based) + State SAS under PARAKH for system “health check-up” (p. 33).
High-stakes exams (school)	Board exams at the end of Grade X and XII; limited re-sit option if one compulsory subject narrowly failed (p. 16).	Board exams retained but made easier, more flexible; best-of-two attempts; options for modular exams, two-level papers, objective and descriptive formats (pp. 18–19).
Mid-cycle benchmarking	Not specified as Grades 3/5/8; focus is on competency and feedback loops (pp. 15–16).	School exams in Grades 3, 5, 8 to track foundational outcomes; developmental use only (p. 19).
Governance / standard-setting	BCSEA sets and improves national assessment; collaborates internationally (p. 16).	National PARAKH to set norms across boards; guide NAS/SAS; shift boards to 21st-century competencies (p. 19).
Higher-education entrance	Not detailed in the cited section.	NTA standard tests (aptitude + subjects) are conducted at least twice a year to reduce coaching (p. 19).
Equity levers	Diagnostic use of assessment; re-sit relief; international benchmarking to raise standards (pp. 15–16).	Low-stakes, multiple attempts; 360° reporting; foundational stage checks; common entrance to reduce burden (pp. 18–19, 33).

ensure continuous alignment of quality with global education trends. India’s NEP (2020) provides a detailed architecture for flexible, low-stakes board exams, 360° progress cards, and multiple attempts (MoE, 2020, p. 18-19). Bhutan could adopt these innovations to reduce exam-related stress further and enhance educational equity. India’s nationwide FLN by Grade 3 mission (MoE, 2020, p. 9-10) could help Bhutan secure learning equity at the foundational level, especially in rural schools.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while distinct national contexts shape India’s NEP (2020) and Bhutan’s NEP (2024), both reflect a broader global shift toward inclusive, competency-based, and future-oriented education systems. The comparison reveals that Bhutan’s policy is deeply rooted in the values of holistic development, well-being, and sustainability. In contrast, India’s policy emphasises large-scale systemic transformation, global competitiveness, and readiness for the knowledge economy. The findings highlight that there is no single model of an effective education policy; rather, successful systems balance global

educational trends with local cultural, social, and developmental priorities. This reinforces the importance of context-sensitive policy design, where national identity and global relevance are not mutually exclusive but can be strategically integrated.

Key takeaways from the study include:

- The importance of aligning philosophical foundations with policy implementation to ensure coherence and sustainability.
- The need for education systems to move beyond rote learning toward competency-based, learner-centred approaches.
- The growing role of assessment reform in supporting meaningful learning rather than merely measuring performance.

Policy recommendations emerging from this study are as follows:

For Bhutan: Strengthen system-level governance and implementation mechanisms to complement its strong value-based and holistic framework. Expanding innovations in structured assessment and institutional capacity could enhance policy effectiveness at scale.

For India: Greater emphasis on socio-emotional learning, wellbeing, and sustainability could balance its strong focus on competitiveness and systemic reform. Integrating these

dimensions more explicitly may support more holistic learner development.

For both countries: Invest in teacher capacity building, as teachers are central to translating policy into practice. Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure alignment between policy intent and implementation outcomes. Encourage regional collaboration and knowledge exchange to share best practices and address common challenges.

Future research should move beyond policy analysis to examine implementation processes, classroom practices, and measurable learning outcomes. Longitudinal and comparative studies across regions could provide deeper insights into how policy reforms translate into educational impact. Additionally, cross-national collaboration between India and Bhutan could serve as a model for regional policy learning in South Asia.

This study underscores that effective education policy is not only about design but also about context, implementation, and continuous adaptation. By bridging global insights with local realities, both India and Bhutan have the potential to build resilient, inclusive, and future-ready education systems.

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