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Federalism and Educational Governance in India: Centre–State Relations in the Implementation of NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

Education is an essential instrument of social transformation, democratic development and national progress. In India, educational governance operates within a federal constitutional framework in which the Union and State governments share responsibilities for policy formulation, implementation, financing and institutional development. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant attempt to restructure the country's educational system through multidisciplinary learning, curricular reforms, digital education, vocational training and improved access to higher education. However, its implementation has generated important questions concerning the balance between national educational objectives and the constitutional autonomy of States. This paper examines Centre–State relations in educational governance, with particular emphasis on the constitutional position of education, institutional arrangements for implementing NEP 2020, financial responsibilities, linguistic diversity and regional inequalities. It adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical methodology based on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, government policy documents, parliamentary records and scholarly literature. Particular attention is given to recent developments, including State-level responses to the PM-SHRI scheme and Maharashtra's 2025 decision concerning the three-language policy. The paper argues that effective implementation requires more than uniform national policy direction; it depends upon meaningful consultation, adequate financial support, administrative coordination and flexibility for regional adaptation. It concludes that cooperative and responsive federalism can strengthen educational governance by combining national standards with State-level innovation and local educational requirements.

◆ **KEYWORDS:** Educational federalism; NEP 2020; Centre–State relations; Educational governance; Cooperative federalism; State autonomy; PM-SHRI.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education occupies a central position in India's democratic and developmental framework because it promotes knowledge, social mobility, constitutional awareness and equal opportunities. However, educational governance in India is complicated by the country's federal structure, linguistic diversity, regional inequalities and differences in administrative capacity. Education was transferred from the State List to the Concurrent List through the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976 (Government of India, 1976). Consequently, both Parliament and State Legislatures possess legislative authority over education, subject to the constitutional distribution of powers under Article 246 and the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India (Government of India, 2024). The National Education Policy 2020 seeks to transform education through reforms in school education, higher education, teacher preparation, research, vocational learning and educational technology. Although the policy was formulated following consultations with different stakeholders, its implementation depends substantially upon State governments, universities, educational boards and local institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The policy therefore raises an important question: how can India establish common national educational objectives while respecting the constitutional autonomy, linguistic identity and regional requirements of individual States? Recent developments have made this question particularly significant. Disagreements concerning the PM-SHRI scheme, the release of Samagra Shiksha funds and Maharashtra's 2025 three-language policy demonstrate that educational governance involves not merely administrative coordination but also questions of political authority, financial responsibility and regional identity. Consequently, NEP 2020 provides

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an important context for examining how India's federal system manages shared educational responsibilities while accommodating regional diversity.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

i. To examine the constitutional framework governing Centre–State relations in educational administration in India.
ii. To analyse the institutional and administrative arrangements for implementing NEP 2020.
iii. To identify major challenges concerning State autonomy, financial resources, regional diversity and educational inequalities.
iv. To examine recent State-level responses to national educational initiatives, particularly PM-SHRI and the three-language policy.
v. To suggest measures for strengthening cooperative federalism and improving educational governance.

3. IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH

i. The study highlights the relationship between federalism and educational policy implementation in India.
ii. It explains how constitutional responsibilities influence educational planning and administration.
iii. It draws attention to the importance of regional diversity, linguistic rights and equitable educational opportunities.
iv. It examines how differences between national policy objectives and State-level priorities influence educational governance.
v. It provides a policy-oriented understanding of how cooperation between governments can improve educational outcomes.

4. CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH

i. The paper connects political science perspectives on federalism with contemporary debates on educational governance.
ii. It analyses NEP 2020 as a shared governance process rather than merely a national policy document.
iii. It identifies the relationship between financial capacity, administrative authority and implementation responsibilities.
iv. It incorporates recent developments concerning PM-SHRI and Maharashtra's language policy to demonstrate the practical dimensions of educational federalism.
v. It proposes a cooperative framework combining national educational objectives with State-level flexibility and local participation.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relationship between federalism and educational governance has received considerable attention in Indian political and educational scholarship. Existing literature highlights the importance of constitutional arrangements, financial distribution, institutional autonomy and regional diversity in determining educational outcomes.

Austin (1999), in his examination of the Indian Constitution, explains the constitutional foundations of Indian federalism and the institutional relationship between the Union and States. His work provides a useful foundation for understanding the distribution of governmental authority, including the constitutional significance of the Concurrent List.

Tilak (2017), in his analysis of Union-State relations in Indian higher education, highlights the importance of examining educational administration and financing within the broader federal framework. His work is relevant to understanding the relationship between national coordination and the responsibilities of State governments. Bhattacharya (2024), in New Education Policy and Higher Education Reforms in India, critically examines NEP 2020 from the perspective of political economy and Centre–State relations. He draws attention to tensions between higher education expansion, privatisation, institutional governance and the maintenance of academic standards. His analysis demonstrates that educational reforms cannot be separated from the historical and political context of Indian federalism.

Dinesh (2024), in her study of federalism, funding and university education in post-independence India, examines how financial arrangements and ideas about national citizenship influenced university governance. Her historical analysis provides an important perspective on the relationship between financial authority and educational institutions. Patel (2025) specifically examines the implementation of NEP 2020 in the context of cooperative federalism. The study highlights the difficulties associated with transferring national educational objectives into State-level administrative and political settings.

The existing literature establishes that educational governance involves more than the formulation of national policy. It also involves the distribution of authority, the availability of resources, institutional autonomy and the capacity of States to adapt national objectives to regional conditions. However, recent developments concerning PM-SHRI, Samagra Shiksha funding and Maharashtra's 2025 three-language policy demonstrate the need for further examination of the relationship between national educational programmes and State-level political responses. The present study addresses this issue by connecting constitutional federalism with contemporary developments in the implementation of NEP 2020.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study follows a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design. It is based on secondary data collected from the Constitution of India, National Education Policy 2020, Ministry of Education publications, parliamentary responses, government resolutions, institutional reports and relevant scholarly literature. The constitutional provisions relating to legislative

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powers, particularly Article 246 and the Seventh Schedule, are examined to understand the distribution of authority between the Union and States.

NEP 2020 is analysed thematically with reference to policy formulation, implementation, educational financing, institutional governance, linguistic diversity and inclusion. The study also examines selected contemporary developments, particularly State responses to PM-SHRI and the Maharashtra Government Resolutions concerning the three-language policy in 2025. Qualitative content analysis is used to identify the relationship between national policy objectives and the federal structure of educational administration. The research does not claim to provide a primary empirical assessment of every State's implementation progress. Instead, it develops a conceptual and policy-oriented understanding of the opportunities and challenges of cooperative federalism in education.

7. ANALYSIS OF THE SUBJECT

The implementation of NEP 2020 must be understood within the broader relationship between constitutional federalism and educational development. India requires a common educational vision to promote national development, but its social, linguistic, economic and institutional diversity makes complete uniformity impractical. The following analysis examines the constitutional, administrative, financial and social dimensions of educational governance.

Constitutional Framework of Educational Federalism

The constitutional distribution of legislative powers establishes the foundation of educational governance in India. Under Article 246, Parliament and State Legislatures exercise legislative authority according to the Union, State and Concurrent Lists of the Seventh Schedule.

Entry 25 of the Concurrent List covers education, including technical education, medical education and universities, subject to the provisions of Entries 63, 64, 65 and 66 of the Union List. Entry 66 of the Union List gives Parliament authority over the coordination and determination of standards in higher education and research institutions (Government of India, 2024).

This arrangement creates a system of shared responsibility. The Union government can formulate national policies, establish standards and support educational programmes, while State governments remain important actors in school administration, teacher recruitment, educational infrastructure and the management of State institutions.

The transfer of education to the Concurrent List through the Forty-second Amendment in 1976 strengthened the constitutional basis for national coordination. At the same time, it increased the importance of cooperation between governments. However, the Concurrent List does not mean that either level of government possesses unlimited authority. Legislative competence must be exercised according to the constitutional distribution of powers, including Article 254 concerning inconsistency between Union and State laws on Concurrent List subjects.

The federal question is therefore not simply whether the Union or States should control education. It concerns how shared authority can be exercised transparently, constitutionally and effectively.

NEP 2020 and the Changing Nature of Educational Governance

The National Education Policy 2020 was approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020. It introduced a comprehensive vision for transforming school education and higher education through multidisciplinary learning, foundational literacy, vocational education, research, teacher development and institutional reforms. The policy seeks to improve access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability across the educational system (Ministry of Education, 2020). Its implementation involves several institutions, including:

- Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- State education departments.
- National and State educational regulatory bodies.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training.
- State Councils of Educational Research and Training.
- Universities and colleges.
- School education boards and local educational institutions.

This institutional structure demonstrates that implementation cannot be completed through a single administrative authority. The policy establishes broad national objectives, but their practical achievement depends substantially on State governments and educational institutions. States differ in their administrative structures, educational priorities and available resources. Some may be prepared to introduce reforms rapidly, while others may require additional time, funding and technical support. Consequently, NEP 2020 should be understood as a continuing governance process rather than a single administrative exercise.

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Centre–State Relations and Cooperative Federalism

Cooperative federalism refers to a system in which different levels of government work together to address shared responsibilities. In educational governance, it requires regular communication, consultation, joint planning and coordination of resources. NEP 2020 recognises the importance of cooperation between the Centre and States. Its implementation involves national and State-level institutions performing different functions. The Union government may establish broad objectives and national frameworks, while State governments adapt programmes to local requirements. However, consultation during policy formulation does not automatically ensure effective cooperation during implementation. States need opportunities to communicate practical difficulties, propose modifications and participate in evaluating educational reforms.

Bhattacharya (2024) highlights the tensions inherent in Centre–State relations in higher education, particularly concerning the relationship between public aspirations, institutional governance and the maintenance of academic standards. A collaborative model would allow the Centre to support national objectives while enabling States to develop implementation strategies suited to their educational conditions.

State Autonomy and Regional Diversity

India's educational system reflects considerable regional diversity. States differ in language, social structure, economic development, geographical conditions, school infrastructure and institutional capacity. Therefore, a uniform implementation model may not produce similar outcomes across the country. One important dimension of this diversity is language.

NEP 2020 recognises the educational importance of home languages and mother tongues. Paragraph 4.11 of the policy addresses the relationship between language and children's learning, noting that young children grasp non-trivial concepts more quickly in their home language. Its central provision states:

> *"Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language. Thereafter, the home/local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible."* (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 4.11)

The paragraph also commits to high-quality textbooks in home languages and encourages a bilingual approach, including bilingual teaching-learning materials, for students whose home language differs from the medium of instruction. It is important to distinguish paragraph 4.11 from paragraph 4.13, which specifically addresses the three-language formula. Paragraph 4.13 states that the formula will continue with greater flexibility and that no language will be imposed on any State. The implementation of these provisions requires sensitivity to regional circumstances, teacher availability, learning materials and parental preferences.

Regional autonomy is also relevant to curriculum development. National curricular frameworks can provide broad educational objectives, but State institutions must be able to incorporate regional history, literature, culture and social experiences. State autonomy should not be understood as opposition to national educational objectives. Rather, it enables those objectives to be implemented in ways that respond to local needs.

Recent Example I: State Responses to the PM-SHRI Scheme

The Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM-SHRI) scheme provides an important contemporary example of the relationship between national educational policy and State autonomy. Approved in 2022, PM-SHRI aims to develop more than 14,500 selected schools as exemplar institutions reflecting the objectives of NEP 2020.

The scheme involves financial participation by the Union and State governments. States and Union Territories are required to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Union Ministry of Education. However, the scheme generated disagreements between the Centre and several State governments.

In July 2024, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Delhi, Punjab and West Bengal had not signed the required MoU. The disagreements concerned the extent of NEP implementation, the conditions attached to the scheme and the implications for State educational priorities. The issue became particularly controversial when the release of funds under Samagra Shiksha was linked to participation in PM-SHRI. Reports in July 2024 indicated that Delhi, Punjab and West Bengal were facing delays in the release of Samagra Shiksha funds (Harigovind et al., 2024).

The controversy continued into 2025. In April 2025, the Union government informed Parliament that Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal had received no central funds under Samagra Shiksha during the 2024-25 financial year, according to the parliamentary information reported at that time ("Kerala, TN and Bengal," 2025). The responses of the States reflected different concerns:

- **Tamil Nadu:** The State government opposed the three-language formula associated with NEP 2020 and maintained its preference for the existing Tamil-English two-language policy. It also expressed concerns about the requirement to implement NEP provisions in their entirety.
- **Kerala:** The State raised concerns about the conditions attached to the PM-SHRI MoU, particularly the commitment to implement the entire NEP framework. Kerala also highlighted the consequences of delayed educational funding for public schools.

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- **West Bengal:** The State raised objections to the PM-SHRI arrangement, including the naming requirements and the implications of participating in a centrally sponsored programme.
- **Punjab and Delhi:** Both initially resisted participation, with concerns arising over the scheme's conditions and the financial implications of non-participation, but later signed the MoU after their Samagra Shiksha funds were withheld ("'Milestone' Pact," 2025).

An important subsequent development occurred on 23 October 2025, when Kerala signed the PM-SHRI MoU, after which a first instalment of Samagra Shiksha funds was released to the State (Shrivastava, 2026). Tamil Nadu, which had not joined PM-SHRI, approached the Supreme Court, after which Samagra Shiksha funds were released to it (Parthiban, 2025). However, in November 2025 Kerala informed the Centre that implementation of PM-SHRI had been kept in abeyance pending a committee report (Shrivastava, 2026).

These developments demonstrate that State responses are not necessarily permanent or identical. They may change according to political negotiations, financial requirements and administrative considerations. From the perspective of federalism, the controversy raises an important question: should access to essential educational funding be connected to acceptance of a particular national policy framework?

Samagra Shiksha supports important educational activities, including school infrastructure, textbooks, teacher-related expenditure and implementation of the Right to Education framework. Therefore, any linkage between such funding and acceptance of another programme requires transparent constitutional and financial justification.

The PM-SHRI controversy illustrates the importance of cooperative federalism, particularly the need for consultation, flexibility and fair financial arrangements.

Recent Example II: Maharashtra's 2025 Three-Language Policy Decision

Maharashtra's 2025 three-language policy controversy provides another significant example of the relationship between NEP 2020 and State autonomy. On 16 April 2025, the Maharashtra government issued a Government Resolution concerning the implementation of the three-language policy in primary schools. The resolution introduced Hindi as the third language for students in Classes 1 to 5.

Following criticism and public debate, the State government issued a corrigendum on 17 June 2025, making the third-language arrangement optional rather than compulsory. However, the controversy continued, particularly concerning the introduction of Hindi at the primary-school level and its implications for Marathi and other regional languages.

On 29 June 2025, the Maharashtra cabinet decided to revoke, and the following day formally revoked, the Government Resolutions dated 16 April and 17 June 2025. The government also announced the formation of a committee headed by Dr Narendra Jadhav to reconsider the implementation of the three-language policy in primary education (Ministry of Education, 2025; "Maharashtra Revokes Three-Language Policy," 2025). The development is significant for three reasons. First, it demonstrates that the implementation of a national educational framework requires consideration of State-level linguistic and cultural circumstances. Second, it illustrates the importance of public consultation and democratic participation in educational policymaking.

Third, it demonstrates that State governments retain an important administrative and political role in determining how national educational objectives are translated into regional educational programmes. The Maharashtra example should be understood in the context of paragraph 4.13 of NEP 2020, which explicitly provides for flexibility in the three-language formula and states that no language will be imposed on any State.

The controversy therefore demonstrates that multilingual education must be developed through consultation, linguistic sensitivity and respect for regional identity.

Financial Federalism and Educational Resources

The financial dimension is one of the most significant challenges in implementing NEP 2020. Educational reforms require investment in school infrastructure, teacher recruitment, teacher training, digital facilities, research, libraries and institutional development.

NEP 2020 envisages increasing public investment in education to 6 per cent of GDP through expenditure by the Centre and State governments (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, States differ in their revenue capacity and expenditure priorities. Economically weaker States may face greater difficulty in financing infrastructure expansion, digital education and institutional reforms. Bhattacharya (2024) highlights the importance of examining higher education reforms through the political economy of public expenditure, institutional expansion and Centre–State relations. Financial federalism therefore requires a clear understanding of responsibilities. If States are expected to implement major reforms, their financial obligations must be supported through predictable funding arrangements.

The PM-SHRI and Samagra Shiksha controversy demonstrates how disagreements concerning national programmes can influence the financial relationship between governments. The distribution of educational resources should also consider regional

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inequalities. Areas with limited infrastructure, remote geographical locations and disadvantaged populations may require additional support. A responsive financial framework should combine national support with State-level planning and transparent monitoring.

Administrative Capacity and Institutional Coordination

The implementation of NEP 2020 depends upon the administrative capacity of educational institutions. Policy reforms require trained teachers, qualified administrators, effective regulatory arrangements and functioning educational infrastructure. The Ministry of Education's implementation plan for school education identifies several implementation areas, including universal access, early childhood education, foundational literacy, curricular restructuring, vocational education and multilingual learning (Ministry of Education, 2021). These objectives require coordination between different administrative levels.

For example, curricular reforms may require State education departments to work with educational boards, teacher-training institutions and schools. Similarly, higher education reforms require cooperation between universities, State departments and regulatory bodies.

Administrative capacity is not uniform across States. Some institutions may have established systems for teacher development, digital learning and academic planning, while others may require additional support. Capacity-building programmes should therefore be an integral component of educational governance. Training, technical assistance, institutional collaboration and exchange of successful practices can help States address implementation difficulties.

Equity, Inclusion and Regional Educational Inequality

Educational federalism must also be evaluated in relation to social justice. The constitutional commitment to equality requires educational policies to address barriers experienced by disadvantaged groups. NEP 2020 places emphasis on equitable and inclusive education, including the educational participation of socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

However, educational inequality is influenced by regional differences in infrastructure, household income, digital access, gender, disability and social background. These challenges cannot be addressed through identical programmes in every State. The Centre can support national equity objectives through funding, policy guidance and institutional coordination. States, in turn, can identify local barriers and develop targeted interventions according to their circumstances.

For instance, educationally disadvantaged districts may require additional schools, transport facilities, scholarships, trained teachers and digital infrastructure. The federal framework should therefore encourage differentiated support according to educational need. This approach can promote substantive equality by recognising that different regions may require different levels and forms of assistance.

8. CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

The implementation of NEP 2020 reveals the complexity of educational governance in a federal democracy. The central challenge is to reconcile national educational objectives with State autonomy, institutional diversity and unequal administrative capacity. The major challenges include:

- Differences between national educational priorities and State-level political preferences.
- Disagreements concerning the conditions attached to centrally sponsored educational programmes.
- Unequal financial and administrative capacities among States.
- Concerns regarding linguistic identity and regional cultural autonomy.
- Inadequate consultation during the implementation stage.
- Differences in institutional preparedness for educational reforms.
- The need for transparent monitoring and accountability.

The policy provides a common framework for reform, but its outcomes depend upon the ability of governments and institutions to translate its objectives into practical programmes. Federal cooperation should not be limited to policy formulation; it should include regular review, feedback and revision.

Effective educational governance requires a partnership based on constitutional responsibility, financial fairness, administrative coordination and democratic accountability.

9. SUGGESTIONS

1. **Strengthen institutional consultation:** Regular meetings involving the Union government, State education ministers, education departments, universities and teacher representatives should be organised to review implementation challenges and develop mutually agreed solutions.
2. **Ensure predictable financial support:** Funding arrangements should be transparent, timely and sensitive to differences in State-level educational requirements. Essential educational entitlements should not be unnecessarily disrupted by disagreements concerning separate policy initiatives.

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3. **Promote State-level flexibility:** States should have adequate flexibility to adapt curricular frameworks, language policies and implementation strategies according to regional circumstances while maintaining agreed national educational objectives.
4. **Respect linguistic and cultural diversity:** The implementation of multilingual education should follow the constitutional provisions, NEP paragraph 4.11 and the flexibility established in paragraph 4.13. Language policies should be developed through consultation with parents, teachers and local communities.
5. **Improve administrative and institutional capacity:** Teacher training, educational planning, digital infrastructure and institutional management should receive sustained attention. Capacity-building programmes should be developed according to the specific needs of different States.
6. **Establish participatory monitoring mechanisms:** Implementation should be evaluated through transparent indicators relating to access, equity, learning outcomes, infrastructure and institutional development. State governments, educational institutions and local stakeholders should participate in reviewing progress.
7. **Strengthen cooperative financial federalism:** The Centre and States should establish clear funding responsibilities, timely disbursement mechanisms and transparent dispute-resolution arrangements for centrally sponsored educational schemes.
8. **Encourage State-level educational innovation:** States should be encouraged to develop innovative educational models based on regional languages, local knowledge, institutional requirements and community participation.

10. CONCLUSION

Education is a shared constitutional responsibility in India, and its effective governance requires coordination between the Union and State governments. The Concurrent List provides the constitutional foundation for this cooperative arrangement. NEP 2020 represents a comprehensive framework for educational transformation. Its implementation depends upon the coordinated efforts of governments, educational institutions, regulatory bodies and other stakeholders. The relationship between national educational objectives and State autonomy remains central to educational federalism. National coordination can promote common standards, while State-level flexibility can accommodate linguistic, cultural and regional diversity.

Recent developments concerning the PM-SHRI scheme demonstrate that disagreements over national policy implementation can influence the financial and administrative relationship between the Centre and States. Similarly, Maharashtra's 2025 three-language policy controversy demonstrates the importance of linguistic identity, public consultation and State-level decision-making. These developments indicate that educational reforms cannot be successful through administrative direction alone. They require constitutional sensitivity, political dialogue, institutional cooperation and equitable financial arrangements. Financial resources, administrative capacity and regional inequalities significantly influence the implementation of educational reforms. Equitable funding, institutional support and targeted interventions are therefore essential for achieving inclusive educational development.

Ultimately, the success of NEP 2020 depends upon a cooperative and responsive federal framework. By strengthening consultation, financial responsibility, institutional capacity and participatory monitoring, India can improve educational governance while respecting its constitutional diversity. Educational federalism should therefore be viewed not merely as a distribution of authority, but as a continuing democratic partnership between the Union, States and educational institutions for expanding educational opportunities and improving the quality of learning.

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