



Original Research Paper

Girls' Education in India: Review of State Policies

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Abstract:

After gaining independence on 15th August 1947, the Indian Constitution guaranteed equal rights and opportunities to all citizens, irrespective of religion, caste, class, gender, or language. It was expected that the Indian state, in the post-independence period, would fulfill its responsibilities sincerely not only towards men but also towards women. However, when we examine literacy data, we find a significant disparity between male and female literacy rates. According to the 1974 report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), women remained behind men in several areas even after independence, education being one of them. As per the 2011 Census, the female literacy rate was 64.63%, while the male literacy rate stood at 80.86%. This gap illustrates that girls have consistently had lower literacy rates compared to boys. Even today, numerous obstacles continue to prevent equal access to education for girls. Many girls drop out of school before completing their education.¹ Therefore, this paper critically examines the national educational policies, Five-Year Plans, and the recommendations of various commissions and committees in independent India with regard to girls' education. The core questions explored are: Do national education policies and recommendations challenge gender biases? And Do post-independence educational documents question existing power structures? To address these questions, a critical analysis of education policy has been undertaken, especially in the context of how effectively they address or fail to address the educational rights and needs of girls in India.

(Key Words: Indian State, National Education Policy, Girl Education, Inequality, Discrimination, Five-Year Plan)

¹ Government of India, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (New Delhi: Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1975), p. 240.

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This study examines the evolution of educational policies in India from a gender perspective, with particular focus on how the Indian state has responded to the problem of gender inequality through education. To understand this development in a systematic manner, the study is divided into two broad historical sections. This study helps to examine the changing role of the state, the transformation of educational policies, and the changing relationship between education, gender, and the economy. The **first section** (from 1947 to 1990) analyzes the recommendations made by various commissions, committees, schemes, and national education policies formulated by the state. The objective is to understand how the Indian state, as a responsible institution, attempted to address gender inequality present in society through its educational policies. The **second section** (from 1990 to the present) critically examines the impact of economic reforms on educational policies, particularly from a gender perspective. With the introduction of major economic changes during this period, the nature of the Indian welfare state began to shift. These transformations had a direct impact on educational policies.

This study is not limited to a descriptive account of policies, schemes, commissions, and their recommendations; rather, it also provides a **critical evaluation of these policy interventions**. A **feminist and gender perspective** has been adopted as the primary analytical framework to examine the extent to which educational policies have challenged the inequalities, patriarchal structures, and power relations embedded in girls' education. The study also examines whether girls have been viewed merely as objects of welfare and policy intervention or whether educational policies have sought to recognise them as independent citizens with equal rights and opportunities.

Thus, this research paper critically evaluates the policies, schemes, commissions, committees, and recommendations related to girls' education from Independence to the present. It seeks to understand the extent to which the Indian state has made meaningful interventions towards achieving **gender** equality, social justice, and educational rights. At the same time, the study highlights that despite significant policy achievements in the field of girls' education, the goal of gender equality in education has not yet been fully

realised. Persistent structural inequalities continue to shape girls' access to, participation in, and experiences of education. Therefore, there remains a need for more gender-sensitive, inclusive, and transformative policy interventions that address the underlying social, economic, and patriarchal structures responsible for educational inequalities.

The State's Perspective on Girls' Education (1947 to 1990)

From 1947 to 1990, the Indian state made several efforts to expand access to education and reduce gender inequality. However, these efforts reflected both progressive intentions and deep-seated societal biases. The period was marked by the development of a welfare state, which recognized education as a key tool for nation-building, yet girls' education often remained a secondary priority.

Constitutional Commitment of Educational Equality

The Indian Constitution (1950) laid a strong foundation for promoting equality and education by guaranteeing the **Right to Equality under Article 14** and prohibiting discrimination on grounds such as sex under **Article 15**. It also recognised the importance of education through **Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy**, which originally directed the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14. Thus, the Constitution envisioned universal and free elementary education for all children, irrespective of gender.² However, despite these constitutional commitments, the implementation of these provisions remained inadequate, particularly in rural and socially and economically marginalised communities, where girls continued to face significant barriers to accessing and completing education.

These constitutional provisions created a strong legal and constitutional foundation for girls' education and established that education is not merely a means of individual development, but also an instrument of social transformation, equality, and citizen empowerment. The spirit of the Constitution was to ensure that every girl had an equal opportunity to

² Shibani Kinkar Choubey, *Bharatiya Samvidhan: Rachna evam Karya*, trans. K. B. Singh (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2011), pp. 33, 52.

receive education and to participate actively in the social, economic, and political life of the country.

Nevertheless, a significant gap remained between constitutional ideals and their actual implementation. Girls, particularly those living in rural areas and belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and economically disadvantaged communities, continued to face numerous barriers to equal access to education. Factors such as the inadequate number of schools, lack of basic educational infrastructure, shortage of female teachers, the practice of child marriage, domestic responsibilities, and prevailing social indifference towards girls' education restricted the expansion of girls' education. Consequently, despite the equal rights guaranteed by the Constitution, gender inequality in education persisted for a long period, and the right to education for girls could not be fully realised in practice.

Thus, during the initial decades after Independence, the Indian state succeeded in establishing a constitutional and policy framework for girls' education. However, deeply rooted social structures, patriarchal values, and administrative limitations made it difficult to translate these constitutional ideals fully into practice. The experience of this period therefore demonstrates that legal equality alone was insufficient to eliminate gender inequalities in education, and that broader social and institutional transformations were necessary to ensure meaningful educational equality for girls.

First to Fifth Five-Year Plans (1951–1974): Welfare Orientation, But Gender-Neutral Approach

First Five-Year Plan (1951–56): Emphasized expansion of primary education and teacher training. However, it lacked a targeted focus on girls. The objective of the scheme was to **bring an increasing**

number of children into the formal school system.

However, no separate or clearly defined strategy was developed specifically for girls' education. It was largely assumed that the overall expansion of education would automatically benefit girls as well. This approach, however, overlooked the specific social, economic, and cultural barriers that restricted girls' access to education.³ **Second and Third Plans (1956–66):** Focus shifted to building infrastructure and secondary education. Hostels and scholarships for girls were introduced, especially from Scheduled Castes and Tribes. These efforts aimed to **increase girls' access to schooling**, but they remained limited in addressing the broader forms of gender discrimination and structural inequalities embedded within the education system.⁴ **Fourth Plan (1969–74):** Introduced programs for **non-formal education** for drop-out girls and working children. It was recognised that a large number of girls were excluded from regular schooling due to various social and economic factors. Therefore, efforts were made to bring them back into the mainstream of education through alternative forms of educational provision.⁵

Despite these efforts, most schemes treated girls as a **'special category'** rather than addressing systemic gender inequality. But we remember also Two progressive education committees **Durga Bai Deshmukh Committee (1958–59)**⁶ and **Hansa Mehta Committee (1962)**⁷ raised the important question that education should not be viewed merely as a matter of access but also as an issue of **gender equality**. The recommendations of these committees were relatively progressive and, in many respects, ahead of their time. The **Durgabai Deshmukh Committee** emphasised that both boys and girls should be equally educated to undertake responsibilities both **within and outside the household**. It stressed the need to eliminate gender inequalities in education, accord special priority to girls' education, and develop separate administrative

³ Government of India. *First Five Year Plan 1951–55*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1955). (Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html> (Accessed on October 18, 2020).

⁴ Government of India. *Second and third Five Year Plan 1955–60*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1960). (Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>

⁵ Government of India. *Fourth Five Year Plan 1969–74*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1974).

(Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>

⁶ Malvika Karlekar, "Striyon ka Swabhav aur Shiksha Tak Pahunch," *Gender Vimarsh*, eds. Pooja Batra and Yogendra Dutt (New Delhi: R.R.C.E., 2016), p. 66.

⁷ Dr. K. K. Tiwari, *Bharatiya Shiksha: Vikas evam Samasyaen* (Allahabad: Horizon Publishers, 1993), p. 194.

arrangements for the advancement of women's education. The **Hansa Mehta Committee (1962)** explicitly opposed the gender-based division of subjects in education. The Committee argued that most of the differences assumed to exist between men and women were not biological but **socially constructed**. Therefore, it considered it necessary to transform an education system that restricted girls primarily to domestic roles. The Committee advocated **curriculum reform, equal educational opportunities, and an educational system that could develop girls as independent, capable, and self-reliant citizens**. Both committees advocated for long-term social change and curriculum reform to empower girls.

The Kothari Commission (1964–66): Landmark but Limited

The **Education Commission of 1964–66, popularly known as the Kothari Commission**, marked an important step towards educational reform in India. The Commission stressed the importance of **universal elementary education** and drew attention to the low enrolment and high dropout rates among girls. It recommended various incentives to encourage girls' participation in education, including **free textbooks, mid-day meals, and uniforms**. It also called for **curriculum reforms** to make education more relevant and accessible to girls. However, the Commission's approach to girls' education also reflected some traditional gender assumptions. Its emphasis on areas such as **home science and vocational training** could reinforce the idea that girls' education should primarily prepare them for domestic and traditionally gendered roles, rather than providing equal opportunities in academic, professional, and technical fields. Thus, while the Kothari Commission recognised gender disparities in education, its approach contained both **progressive elements and limitations shaped by prevailing gender norms**.⁸

National Policy on Education (1968): Symbolic Commitment

The **National Policy on Education (NPE), 1968** was independent India's first national education policy and was largely based on the recommendations of the **Kothari Commission**. The policy emphasised the removal of inequalities in education and the provision of **equal educational opportunities for all**. It recognised girls as a disadvantaged group and

acknowledged the importance of improving their access to education. However, the policy did not provide a clear and concrete action plan specifically for girls' education. Although it expressed a commitment to reducing gender inequalities, it did not propose adequate measures to challenge the social and patriarchal structures that continued to restrict girls' access to and participation in education. Consequently, its commitment to gender equality remained largely confined to the policy level.⁹

Thus, the **Kothari Commission and the National Policy on Education, 1968** played an important role in bringing girls' education into the national policy agenda. However, their approach remained influenced by welfarist and protectionist assumptions and did not completely move beyond these limitations. Rather than treating gender equality as a question of rights and social justice, girls' education was primarily situated within the broader objectives of national development and social welfare. Although both documents emphasised equal educational opportunities, they did not adequately challenge the patriarchal structures and gender norms embedded within the educational system and wider society.

Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI Report, 1974): A Turning Point

The **Towards Equality Report (1974)** was a landmark document and an important feminist critique of the Indian state's approach towards women's education and development. The report revealed that girls' education had been significantly neglected in educational policy and planning and highlighted the persistent inequalities faced by women and girls. It also demonstrated how educational content, teaching practices, and policy priorities often reproduced and reinforced patriarchal values and traditional gender roles. Another major concern raised by the report was the lack of gender-disaggregated data, which made it difficult to identify the actual extent of women's and girls' exclusion from education. Thus, the *Towards Equality* Report marked an important shift from viewing women's educational disadvantage as an isolated problem to understanding it as a consequence of broader structural and gender inequalities within Indian society and the state.

The CSWI report brought gender into the center of educational discourse, marking a shift from welfare to

⁸ Government of India. *Kothari Education Commission Report – 1964*. (New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1966), p. 221-224.

⁹ Government of India. *National Policy on Education*. (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 1986), pp. 1–2.

rights-based thinking. In girls' schools, subjects like science and mathematics are often replaced with home science to provide them with training in home management. However, what should actually be done is to make every subject objective and scientific so that subject selection is not based on gender but remains a matter of individual choice. If the subject of home science is made objective and scientific, it would not only provide knowledge of household management but also offer valuable insights into nutrition and food preservation—making it an interesting subject for everyone.¹⁰

Sixth and Seventh Five-Year Plans (1980–90): Shift Towards Gender-Sensitive Interventions

Sixth Plan (1980–85): For the first time, **women's development** was treated as a separate chapter. It emphasized reducing gender gaps in education. In the Sixth Five Year Plan document, a significant step was taken by including a **separate chapter on women**, titled "**Women and Development.**" This marked an important shift in policy focus, as it acknowledged that **women's issues required dedicated attention** within national planning. The chapter emphasized the need to integrate women into the development process not just as beneficiaries but as active participants. It focused on areas such as education, employment, health, and skill development, aiming to promote gender equality and women's empowerment as essential components of national development.¹¹ **Seventh Plan (1985–90):** Focused on improving female literacy, expanding facilities in rural areas, and increasing community participation.¹² Despite increased awareness, many programs were still piecemeal, lacked monitoring, and failed to address **social norms** preventing girls from accessing education.

National Education Policy, 1986

The National Policy on Education (1986) was a landmark in acknowledging gender disparity in education, yet its approach remained both progressive and limited. For the first time, the policy explicitly addressed the need for women's empowerment

through education, stating that education would be used as a tool to bring about equality and social justice. It emphasized special attention to rural girls, SC/ST girls, and minority girls, acknowledging their systemic marginalization. The launch of programs like **Mahila Samakhya (1988)** reflected a shift towards collective empowerment and grassroots mobilization. However, a critical analysis reveals that while the policy spoke of gender equality, it continued to view girls largely through a welfare-oriented and instrumentalist lens as future mothers or caregivers, not as independent agents of change. The focus was more on access and enrollment rather than transforming the content and structure of education that reinforces gender stereotypes.¹³

However, from a critical perspective, it becomes evident that despite several progressive elements, the **National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986** also had significant limitations. Although the policy emphasised gender equality, girls were largely viewed within the framework of welfare and development. Rather than recognising them as independent, autonomous, and transformative citizens, the policy continued to place considerable emphasis on their future roles as mothers, homemakers, and caregivers. Its primary focus was on increasing girls' access to schooling and improving their enrolment, while comparatively less attention was given to transforming the gender biases embedded in educational content, curriculum, teaching practices, and institutional structures.

Furthermore, although the policy acknowledged the need for gender-sensitive curricula, teacher training, and educational reforms, it did not establish sufficiently clear mechanisms of accountability to ensure their effective implementation. As a result, many of the policy's progressive commitments had only a limited impact at the ground level. Thus, while the **NPE 1986** brought the issues of girls' education and women's empowerment to greater prominence in the national policy discourse, it could not fully challenge the deep-rooted patriarchal values and

¹⁰ Government of India, *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*. (New Delhi: Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1975), p. 240, 276.

¹¹ Government of India. *Sixth Five Year Plan 1980–1985*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1985). (Available online at: <https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>)

¹² Government of India. *Seventh Five Year Plan 1985–90*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1990), p. 226. (Available online at: <https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>)

¹³ Government of India. *National Policy on Education 1986*. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 1986, pp. 5–8.

structural inequalities embedded within the education system and wider society.¹⁴

Beyond Access: Gender Equality and the Limits of Educational Reform

The analysis of the educational policies, commissions, and committees discussed above reveals that the Indian state gradually recognised girls' education as an important component of national development and social welfare. However, the primary focus of these interventions remained largely on increasing girls' enrolment, expanding access to schooling, and reducing visible disparities in educational participation. While these measures were important, they did not adequately engage with the deeper question of what kind of education girls were receiving and whether the education system itself reproduced existing gender inequalities.

From a critical and feminist perspective, the major limitation of these policies was their insufficient engagement with the relationship between education, power, and patriarchy. The policies addressed the question of how more girls could be brought into schools, but paid comparatively less attention to questions such as why boys and girls were often educated with different expectations, why certain subjects and occupations were associated with particular genders, and how curriculum, textbooks, teaching practices, and institutional structures reproduced gender stereotypes. The representation of different social groups, including women, lower castes, religious minorities, and other marginalised communities, also remained inadequate. Consequently, the issue was not merely one of access to education but also one of the production and distribution of knowledge itself.

Although successive policies acknowledged the existence of structural inequalities and emphasised the removal of gender bias from textbooks and curricula, these commitments were not always translated into effective institutional practice. Efforts to encourage girls' participation in science, mathematics, and other traditionally male-dominated fields remained limited in their impact. The persistence of gender stereotypes within families, schools, curricula, and wider society demonstrated that increasing enrolment alone could not dismantle the structures that reproduced educational inequality.

In the initial decades after Independence, the primary concern was to expand educational access and create basic opportunities for girls. The Constitution provided the fundamental framework of equality and non-discrimination, while committees such as the Durgabai Deshmukh Committee and the Hansa Mehta Committee brought greater attention to the specific barriers faced by girls. The Kothari Commission and the National Policy on Education, 1968 further recognised girls as a disadvantaged group and emphasised the need for equal educational opportunities. By the time of the National Policy on Education, 1986, girls' education had become a more explicit component of national development and social policy, with greater emphasis on women's empowerment and the removal of gender disparities.

The **1974 government report, *Towards Equality*** marked an important turning point in this regard. By presenting extensive evidence on the status of women, the report demonstrated that women continued to remain significantly disadvantaged in comparison with men across education, employment, political participation, and other spheres of social and economic life. It also highlighted the extent to which women remained marginal to the dominant development agenda. More importantly, the report encouraged a deeper examination of the patriarchal structures that shaped women's everyday lives. It drew attention to institutions such as marriage, family, religion, caste, law, and education, demonstrating that these institutions did not affect women and men equally but were embedded in unequal relations of power.

Thus, the period from 1947 to 1990 represents an important transition in the Indian state's approach to girls' education. The policy discourse gradually moved from a narrow concern with access and welfare towards a broader recognition of gender inequality. However, this transition remained incomplete. The major limitation was that educational reforms largely sought to bring girls into an existing system rather than fundamentally transform the gendered structures, knowledge systems, institutional practices, and power relations within that system. Therefore, the experience of this period demonstrates that achieving gender equality in education requires more than increasing girls' enrolment; it requires transforming the social and educational structures through which inequality is continuously reproduced.

Education Policies for Girls (1990 to Present)

¹⁴Ibid.

The period after 1990 marked a significant shift in India's education landscape due to liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG) policies. These changes reshaped the role of the state, weakening the welfare model and influencing education planning. Although a number of girl-focused educational schemes emerged during this time, they were often beneficiary-driven, short-term, and lacked structural depth.

Eighth to Twelfth Five-Year Plans (1992–2017): Girls' Education, Empowerment and the Discourse of Inclusion

The **Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992–1997)** prioritised **women and child development** and aimed at the **empowerment of women through education**. It provided for girls' access to residential schools, scholarships, and nutritional programmes. However, its approach remained largely **welfare-oriented** and did not adequately address deeper issues such as the quality of education, curriculum biases, and patriarchal structures.¹⁵ The **Ninth Plan (1997–2002)** introduced the concept of women's development as a human right. The blueprint for **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)** was created, with an emphasis on increasing the enrolment and attendance of girls, particularly those from SC, ST, and minority communities. However, SSA focused more on **infrastructure and access** than on pedagogical reform, teacher training, and addressing gender biases in textbooks.¹⁶ The **Tenth Plan (2002–2007)** adopted a **"Gender Mainstreaming"** approach, under which all policies and programmes were expected to be assessed from a gender perspective. It also introduced programmes such as **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV)** to improve educational opportunities for marginalised girls. Although the approach was progressive, its implementation remained weak. Many KGBV schools faced

challenges such as poor infrastructure, shortage of trained staff, inadequate facilities, and weak monitoring mechanisms, which limited the effectiveness of the programme.¹⁷ The **Eleventh and Twelfth Plans (2007–2017)** emphasised inclusive and equitable education. The **Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009** was enacted, guaranteeing free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14, while **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs)** were expanded to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged girls. Despite these legal and policy measures, girls, particularly those from rural areas, continued to face barriers such as lack of toilets, unsafe school environments, gender-based violence, and high dropout rates. The plans also gave limited attention to **intersectional realities**, particularly the combined impact of caste and class on girls' access to and experience of education.¹⁸ The period after the Twelfth Plan witnessed a greater shift towards privatisation and digitalisation in education. The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** promises a more gender-inclusive curriculum, greater participation of girls in **STEM education**, and safer and more inclusive schooling environments.¹⁹

Nevertheless, despite legal rights and policy commitments, a large number of girls continued to face various barriers to education. Particularly in rural areas, problems such as the lack of toilets, unsafe school environments, gender-based violence, child marriage, and high dropout rates persisted. Moreover, the plans did not give adequate attention to the intersection of caste, class, and gender. As a result, the specific experiences and challenges faced by girls from different social groups could not be fully addressed.

NEP 2020 emphasis on gender-inclusive curriculum

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>

¹⁸ Government of India. *Eleventh Five Year Plan 2007–2012*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 2012), p. 17, 20. (Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>

¹⁹ Government of India. *Twelfth Five Year Plan 2012–2017*, Volume III: Social Sectors. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 2013,) pp. 25–30.

(Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html>

¹⁵ Government of India. *Eighth Five Year Plan 1992–97*. (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 1997), p. 329–332. (Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>

¹⁶ Government of India. *Ninth Five Year Plan 1997–2002*. New Delhi: Planning Commission, 2002, pp. 112–115. (Available online at:)

<https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/plans/planrel/fiveyr/index1.html>

¹⁷ Government of India. *Tenth Five Year Plan 2002–2007*. New Delhi: Planning Commission, 2002, pp. 82–85. (Available online at:)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive and equitable education, placing special focus on girls' education, particularly from marginalized and disadvantaged communities. It proposes the creation of a **Gender-Inclusion Fund** to support state-level initiatives that promote access and retention of girls and transgender children in schools. The policy also suggests the expansion of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV), greater representation of girls in **STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics)** fields, gender-sensitive curriculum, and a safe and inclusive school environment. However, critical challenges persist. NEP 2020 does not adequately address the deep-rooted structural barriers such as patriarchy, caste hierarchies, social stigma, and gendered expectations that often prevent girls from continuing their education. Additionally, the policy's push towards digital education risks widening the digital divide, particularly impacting rural and economically disadvantaged girls. Thus, while NEP 2020 sets progressive goals, it requires robust implementation and context sensitive strategies to ensure girls not only access but meaningfully engage with and benefit from education.²⁰

Girls' Education after 1990: Challenges and Progress

After the 1990s, educational policies increasingly emphasized **non-formal education and open schooling**, which were considered important measures for achieving the universalization of education. After 1990, greater emphasis was placed on primary education for children in the 6–14 age group. Consequently, the educational needs of children in the 0–6 age group received relatively less attention. With regard to girls' education, several positive measures were introduced during this period. These included an emphasis on the appointment of women teachers, the provision of free uniforms, curriculum restructuring, and efforts to eliminate gender bias from curricula and textbooks. These initiatives reflected a growing recognition of the need to make education more accessible and equitable for girls.

The **state has played a dual role** in shaping the landscape of girls' education in India both as a **facilitator** and, at times, a limiting force. On the positive side, the Indian state has laid a **constitutional foundation** for equal educational rights through

Articles 14, 15, and 21A. Over the years, it has launched several initiatives like **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV)**, and most recently, the **Gender Inclusion Fund** under **NEP 2020**, aimed at enhancing girls' access, enrollment, and retention in education. It has also provided **scholarships, free uniforms, mid-day meals**, and built **hostels and toilets** to reduce dropout rates among girls.

However, a critical examination reveals that much of the state's approach has remained welfare-oriented and instrumentalist, focusing more on enrollment numbers than quality or empowerment. Policies often fail to address deep-rooted structural barriers like patriarchy, caste discrimination, early marriage, and gender-based violence. Moreover, there is insufficient investment in gender-sensitive curricula, teacher training, and safe school environments. Implementation remains uneven across regions, especially in rural and marginalized areas.

Critical Analysis of Girls' Education in India

An analysis of **education policies and Five-Year Plan documents** reveals that the development of girls' education has largely been assessed through **enrolment rates alone**, which is inadequate for understanding the actual educational status of girls. Enrolment is only the first step towards educational participation. Along with enrolment, it is equally important to examine attendance rates, retention rates, dropout rates, transition from one level of education to another, and completion rates. However, these dimensions have often received inadequate attention in policy discussions. The analysis of educational policy documents also suggests that girls' education has, to a considerable extent, continued to be understood through the narrow objectives of population control, family welfare, and preparing women to become ideal homemakers. Education for girls has therefore often been linked to their future roles as mothers, wives and caregivers rather than being viewed primarily as a means of developing their autonomy, citizenship, economic independence and participation in the public sphere.

This perspective is also reflected in the traditional importance given to Home Science and domestic skills in girls' education. Such subjects have historically

²⁰ Ministry of Education, Government of India, *National Education Policy 2020* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2020), 6–8, 18–20, 26–28,

https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

been associated with the preparation of girls for household management and caregiving responsibilities. Although domestic knowledge itself is not necessarily problematic, the critical issue is that such expectations have often been gender-specific, with household management being treated primarily as a responsibility of women and girls.

At the same time, women have increasingly entered the public sphere and paid employment, but gendered patterns of occupational segregation continue to shape their opportunities. Women have often been concentrated in occupations that are perceived as extensions of their traditional domestic and caring roles, such as teaching, nursing, childcare, reception and other service-sector occupations. These professions are important and socially valuable, but the concentration of women in such occupations reflects the persistence of gender stereotypes regarding what kinds of work are considered appropriate for women.

The continuing inequality in education and employment cannot be understood without examining the role of patriarchal social structures. Patriarchy assigns different rights, responsibilities, roles and spaces to men and women. Men are traditionally associated with the public sphere, authority and economic decision-making, whereas women are associated with the private sphere, family, care work and household responsibilities. Such divisions influence not only family practices but also educational expectations and institutional practices. Importantly, patriarchal assumptions are not limited to society or family structures; they can also be reflected in state policies and educational planning. Although successive governments have introduced several policies aimed at promoting girls' education, the underlying understanding of women's roles has not always been completely transformed. Thus, there can be a contradiction between the formal objective of gender equality and the social assumptions embedded in the implementation of educational policies.

Schools themselves are important sites where these gender relations can either be reproduced or challenged. When schools lack gender-sensitive curricula, safe and inclusive environments, adequate sanitation facilities, gender-sensitive teaching practices and institutional mechanisms for addressing discrimination and harassment, girls may find it more difficult to continue their education. Consequently, problems such as irregular attendance, disengagement from classroom learning and eventual dropout may emerge.

Therefore, enrolment alone cannot be treated as an adequate indicator of progress in girls' education. A meaningful assessment must examine whether girls are able to attend school regularly, remain in school, complete their education, acquire meaningful knowledge and skills, exercise agency, and use education to expand their social, economic and political opportunities.

Although education policies have theoretically recognized the need to remove hidden gender biases from textbooks, progress in this direction has remained slow and has produced limited results. In many cases, changes in textbooks have been superficial rather than transformative. For instance, women may now be represented as teachers, doctors, professionals or public figures, but the deeper assumptions about women's primary responsibility for household work, caregiving and family remain largely intact. The role of the state is particularly important in this context because the state determines educational priorities through policy-making, curriculum frameworks, textbooks, teacher-training programmes and institutional structures. From a critical perspective, the analysis of state educational policies suggests that the state has not always been successful in challenging the patriarchal values embedded in society. In some instances, educational policies may reproduce existing gender norms rather than fundamentally transforming them.

Another important dimension of gender inequality in education is the gender-based division of academic subjects. Traditionally, **science, mathematics, technology and technical subjects** have often been perceived as male-dominated or masculine fields. In contrast, subjects such as **sociology, psychology, food and nutrition, and home science** have frequently been associated with women and described as "soft" or feminine subjects. Such perceptions are not based on the intellectual abilities of girls and boys but are largely shaped by socially constructed gender stereotypes. This gendered understanding of academic subjects can influence students' educational choices from an early age. Girls may be encouraged to choose subjects considered compatible with their expected roles as caregivers, teachers, mothers or homemakers, while boys may be encouraged to pursue subjects associated with technology, science, mathematics, engineering and professional advancement. As a result, girls may have fewer opportunities to enter fields that provide greater economic mobility and access to decision-making positions.

From a **feminist perspective**, the central problem is therefore not merely whether girls have been brought into schools, but what kind of education they receive, how schools reproduce or challenge gender norms, and whether education actually transforms the unequal power relations between women and men. The persistence of patriarchal attitudes within families, communities, state policies and educational institutions helps explain why increased enrolment has not automatically resulted in substantive gender equality.

In this context, the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** marks an important shift towards a more gender-sensitive and inclusive approach to education. It emphasizes **gender equity and inclusion** through measures such as the proposed **Gender-Inclusion Fund**, which aims to support girls and other disadvantaged groups in accessing quality education. The policy also gives special attention to **Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)** and recognizes barriers that prevent girls from entering, continuing and completing their education. It promotes a safe and inclusive school environment, better access to **sanitation, toilets, transportation, scholarships and residential facilities**, and seeks to address inequalities beyond mere enrolment. If these provisions are implemented meaningfully, education can move beyond simply increasing girls' participation in schools and become a significant instrument for challenging patriarchal norms, expanding girls' agency and promoting substantive gender equality.

Conclusion

The history of girls' education in India reveals a gradual shift from limited access and welfare-oriented approaches towards greater emphasis on equality, inclusion and empowerment. Although successive Five-Year Plans and education policies expanded girls' enrolment and introduced measures such as scholarships, free uniforms, women teachers, gender-sensitive curricula and institutional support, significant gaps remained between policy commitments and actual educational experiences. From 1990 onwards, Five-Year Plans did begin to address girls' education more explicitly, but their focus remained largely on access, enrollment, and basic incentives. Deeper issues such as curriculum reform, classroom discrimination, and the ideological purpose of education were sidelined. Girls were largely viewed as passive beneficiaries rather than active, thinking citizens. Therefore, there is a pressing need to redefine the goals of girls' education from a

critical, feminist, and intersectional perspective that challenges structural inequalities within. NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework that, if implemented with sensitivity and accountability, holds the potential to empower girls as equal stakeholders in the nation's development. It offers a hopeful vision where education becomes not just a means of literacy, but a powerful tool for social transformation and gender justice.

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