

**Systematic Review of Government-Led Education Reforms in India: Policy,
Implementation, and Outcome.**

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Abstract

In this paper, government-led education reforms in India were reviewed while focusing on policy design, legal foundations, implementation, and outcomes. It examines landmark reforms, including the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001), the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act, 2009), the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), and other education schemes such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS). The study situates these reforms within India's constitutional framework, particularly Article 21A of the Constitution, and evaluates the persistent gap between policy design and implementation. A comparative analysis with Nigeria's education policies and laws, particularly the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 and the National Policy on Education (NPE), reveals both parallels and differences in how two developing nations have pursued universal access to quality education. The paper finds that while India has achieved commendable progress in enrolment and school infrastructure, learning outcomes, equity, and implementation remain deficient. The policy to implementation gap, caused by financial constraints, bureaucratic issues and inadequate implementation plans and execution, continues to undermine reform potential. The paper concludes with lessons for public policy design and reform implementation applicable to India, Nigeria, and comparable developing-country contexts.

Keywords: Education reform, India National Education Policy, Right to Education, Access vs Quality Divide, Policy to implementation gap, Comparative Education, State Capacity, Federalism.

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as the bedrock of national development, a driver of economic growth, and the primary instrument through which states pursue social justice and human capital formation (Kingdon, 2007). In developing nations, the challenge is not merely one of philosophy but of execution of bridging ambitious constitutional mandates with the realities of poverty, institutional capacity constraints, and demographic complexity. India, with a population of over 1.4 billion and approximately 260 million school-age children, represents one of the most complex educational reform environments in the world (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

Over the past six decades since independence, the Indian government has pursued successive waves of education reform. Beginning with the Kothari Commission Report of 1966, which laid out the philosophical and structural underpinnings of a national education system, through the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968 and 1986, to the landmark Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) of 2009, and culminating in the transformative National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020, India has demonstrated persistent political commitment to educational advancement (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). Each reform wave has addressed the deficiencies of its predecessor, yet each has also generated its own implementation deficits.

The scholarly discourse on Indian education reform reveals a consistent tension: policies are typically well-designed reflecting global best practices, international development goals such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), and in line with the constitution but fall short during the implementation phase (Kumar et al., 2021). Factors such as fiscal federalism, bureaucratic inertia, political fragmentation across states, teacher shortages, and infrastructure deficits combine to produce a wide gap between what policies promise and what citizens experience.

A central argument advanced in this paper is that the expansion of access to education has not been matched by a corresponding improvement in quality. This Access vs Quality divide represents a critical fault line in India's education system, where increased enrolment and infrastructural development coexist with persistent deficiencies in learning outcomes, pedagogical practices, and institutional effectiveness. Drawing on empirical insights, the paper

argues that this divide is not merely a technical or administrative issue but a structural outcome of how education policy is conceptualised and implemented.

This paper reviews this trajectory systematically, situating it within a comparative frame that includes Nigeria's education reform experience. Nigeria, like India, is a developing nation faced with universal access to education, issues with policy implementation, and persistent learning outcome deficits (Yusuf & Ajere, 2000; Nwoke et al, 2024). The comparison illuminates both shared structural challenges and differentiated policy responses. The analysis proceeds through the following sections: a review of the legal and constitutional foundations of India's education reforms; an examination of major reform programs and their implementation; a comparative analysis with Nigerian education policies; a policy to implementation gap analysis; and finally, lessons for public policy and reform design.

Against the backdrop, this paper is guided by two interrelated research questions. First: to what extent have government-led education reforms in India succeeded in translating constitutional commitments and policy ambitions into equitable and high-quality learning outcomes and what structural factors account for the persistent gap between policy design and implementation? Second: what lessons can India's education reform trajectory offer to comparable federal developing-country context, with reference to Nigeria's Universal Basic Education program?

2. Literature Review

The study of education reforms in India has generated a substantial body of interdisciplinary scholarship spanning economics, sociology, and public policy. Much of this literature converges on a central paradox: while India has achieved notable success in expanding access to schooling, the quality of education, particularly in terms of learning outcomes, remains uneven and often inadequate. This section reviews key academic and policy-oriented contributions to this debate, focusing on three broad themes: the expansion of access, the persistence of quality deficits, and the structural and institutional determinants of educational outcomes.

A significant strand of scholarship has emphasised the success of state-led interventions in increasing enrolment and access to education. Scholars such as Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen have long argued that public investment in basic education is fundamental to human

development and social justice (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Government initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Right to Education (RTE) Act have been widely credited with improving school participation rates, particularly among marginalised communities. Empirical evidence suggests that enrolment in primary education has approached near-universal levels in many parts of the country (Government of India, 2011). This expansion reflects a broader policy commitment to universalisation and equity, aligning with constitutional mandates and international development goals.

However, a growing body of research has drawn attention to the limitations of these gains, particularly in relation to educational quality. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys have consistently highlighted low levels of foundational learning among students, even after several years of schooling (ASER Centre, 2022). For instance, a significant proportion of students in upper primary grades are unable to read basic texts or perform simple arithmetic tasks. Scholars such as Geeta Kingdon (2007) have argued that these outcomes reflect systemic weaknesses in teacher accountability, pedagogical practices, and school governance. This has led to the recognition that access, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure meaningful educational outcomes.

The persistence of this Access vs Quality divide has been further explored through institutional and governance frameworks. From a political economy perspective, education systems are shaped by state capacity, bureaucratic incentives, and resource allocation patterns. Lant Pritchett (2013) characterises many developing-country education systems, including India's, as exhibiting "learning without schooling," where formal participation does not translate into actual learning. Similarly, Karthik Muralidharan (2017) highlights inefficiencies in public education delivery, including issues related to teacher absenteeism, inadequate monitoring, and weak institutional accountability. These studies suggest that the problem is not merely one of resource availability but of how institutions function and deliver services.

Sociological perspectives add another layer to this analysis by emphasising the role of social inequalities and cultural factors in shaping educational experiences. Scholars have pointed out that disparities based on class, caste, gender, and region continue to influence both access to and quality of education (PROBE Team, 1999; Tilak, 2007). Even where formal access is ensured, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face structural barriers that limit their ability to benefit from schooling. This highlights the need to understand education not only as a

policy domain but as a social institution embedded within broader hierarchies and power relations.

Recent policy discourse, particularly following the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has acknowledged many of these challenges. The NEP explicitly emphasises foundational literacy and numeracy, teacher training, and institutional reform as key priorities (Government of India, 2020). However, scholars remain cautious about the extent to which policy intentions will translate into effective implementation, given persistent constraints in governance and state capacity. As such, there is a growing recognition that bridging the access versus quality divide requires not only new policies but also deeper structural transformation.

Despite extensive scholarship on individual aspects of education reform, there remains a relative lack of integrated analyses that systematically examine the relationship between policy design, implementation, and outcomes. This paper seeks to address this gap by synthesising these dimensions within a unified analytical framework. In doing so, it builds upon existing literature while advancing the argument that the coexistence of expanded access and limited quality is a structurally produced outcome, rather than a temporary or incidental issue.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study situates the analysis of education reforms in India within a multidisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from state capacity, governance theory, and political sociology of education. These perspectives enable a deeper understanding of how policy design, institutional functioning, and social structures interact to shape educational outcomes. Rather than treating policy success or failure as a matter of isolated administrative efficiency, this framework conceptualises education reform as embedded within broader political, institutional, and social dynamics.

At the core of this analysis is the concept of state capacity, which refers to the ability of the state to effectively design, implement, and enforce public policies. Scholars such as Peter Evans (1995) and Francis Fukuyama (2013) emphasise that the success of development policies depends not only on their intent but on the institutional capabilities that support their execution. In the context of education in India, this includes administrative efficiency, teacher management systems, monitoring mechanisms, and the allocation of resources. Weaknesses in these areas

often result in a gap between policy formulation and actual outcomes, contributing directly to the persistence of low learning levels despite high enrolment.

Closely related to state capacity is the concept of governance, which extends beyond formal state structures to include the processes, institutions, and relationships through which public policy is implemented. Governance-oriented approaches highlight the role of decentralisation, accountability, and institutional coordination in shaping policy outcomes. In India's education system, decentralised frameworks such as local school management committees were intended to improve accountability and community participation. However, as scholars have noted, these mechanisms often operate within constrained institutional environments, limiting their effectiveness (World Bank, 2018). This suggests that governance reforms must be understood not merely as formal institutional changes but in terms of their practical functioning and embedded constraints.

From a political sociology perspective, education is not simply a technical domain of policy, but a social institution shaped by power relations, inequality, and cultural norms. The works of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) are particularly relevant in highlighting how education systems can reproduce existing social hierarchies through differential access to cultural and social capital. In the Indian context, disparities based on caste, class, gender, and region continue to influence educational experiences and outcomes. Even where access to schooling has expanded, these structural inequalities shape the quality of engagement and the capacity of students to benefit from education.

Furthermore, the concept of institutional embeddedness, as articulated by Evans (1995), helps explain why similar policies may produce different outcomes across regions and contexts. Institutions do not operate in isolation but are embedded within social and political environments that influence their functioning. In India, variations in state-level governance, administrative capacity, and socio-economic conditions result in uneven implementation of education policies. This reinforces the need to move beyond uniform policy prescriptions and consider contextual factors in analysing reform outcomes.

The "Access vs Quality" divide, which constitutes the central analytical lens of this paper, can be understood through the interaction of these theoretical perspectives. From a state capacity standpoint, the expansion of access reflects the state's ability to mobilise resources and implement large-scale programmes such as school construction and enrolment drives. However,

the failure to ensure quality points to limitations in institutional effectiveness, particularly in areas such as teacher training, curriculum delivery, and learning assessment. From a governance perspective, the disconnect between policy intent and implementation highlights issues of accountability, coordination, and monitoring. From a political sociology perspective, persistent inequalities shape not only who accesses education but how they experience it.

By integrating these frameworks, this study moves beyond a purely descriptive account of education reform to offer a structural explanation of its outcomes. It argues that the coexistence of expanded access and limited quality is not an anomaly but a predictable outcome of institutional constraints, governance challenges, and social inequalities. This theoretical grounding provides the basis for the subsequent analysis of policy design, implementation, and outcomes.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a systematic review of secondary sources to analyse government-led education reforms in India. This approach enables a multi-dimensional analysis that connects the formal ambitions of education policy with the institutional and social conditions that shape their realisation.

4.1 Research Design

The core of this study is a systematic review, which involves the structured collection, evaluation, and synthesis of existing literature and policy documents. Unlike a narrative review, a systematic approach ensures greater rigour by following a consistent process of source selection and thematic analysis. While a full PRISMA protocol was not applied, sources were selected systematically based on relevance, credibility, and contribution to the themes under examination. The review focuses on key dimensions of education reform, namely:

- Policy design
- Implementation mechanisms
- Educational outcomes

4.2 Analytical Approach

The analysis follows a thematic framework, where data from various sources are categorised and interpreted across three primary domains:

1. Policy Design – examining the objectives, scope, and structure of education reforms
2. Implementation – analysing administrative processes, institutional capacity, and governance mechanisms
3. Outcomes – evaluating the impact of reforms on access, retention, and learning

Within each domain, particular attention is given to identifying patterns that illustrate the tension between expanded access and educational quality. This approach enables a structured yet flexible analysis, accommodating both quantitative indicators, such as enrollment rates, and qualitative dimensions, including governance processes and institutional dynamics.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to certain limitations that must be acknowledged:

- Reliance on secondary data may reflect institutional or reporting biases.
- The systematic review, while structured, is constrained by the availability and accessibility of sources.
- The absence of primary data collections means that the analysis cannot account for local or classroom-level variations in educational experience that aggregate secondary data may obscure.

Despite these limitations, the systematic use of secondary analysis across diverse source types allows for a balanced and multi-dimensional understanding of education reforms.

5. Legal and Constitutional Foundations of India's Education Reforms

5.1 Pre-Amendment Constitutional Framework

The foundational legal basis for education in India is rooted in the Constitution of India, 1950. Originally, the right to education was not a justiciable fundamental right but was rather placed in Part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy), specifically under Article 45, which directed the State to endeavour to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of fourteen years within ten years of the Constitution's commencement (Drishti Judiciary, 2024). Article 39(f) further tasked the State with ensuring that children were not exploited and were given adequate opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner. However, because Directive Principles are non-justiciable, citizens could not seek judicial enforcement of this educational guarantee.

A significant, albeit gradual, judicial evolution occurred through the Supreme Court of India. In the landmark case of *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* (1992), the Supreme Court recognized the right to education as implicit within the right to life under Article 21. This was reinforced in *Unnikrishnan J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993), where the Court conclusively held that the right to education was a fundamental right derivable from Article 21 (Drishti Judiciary, 2024). These judicial pronouncements created the scaffolding for eventual legislative and constitutional action.

5.2 The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002 and Article 21A

The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act (2002) marked a watershed in India's education policy by inserting Article 21A, which elevated elementary education (ages 6–14) to a Fundamental Right. Alongside, Article 45 was reoriented toward early childhood care (0–6 years), and Article 51A(k) imposed a parental duty to ensure schooling. This three-tiered restructuring—state obligation, parental responsibility, and child entitlement—created a holistic constitutional compact. However, the Amendment deferred implementation to subsequent legislation, resulting in a seven-year gap before the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) was enacted.

5.3 The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

The RTE Act (2009) gave effect to Article 21A by mandating free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14. It prohibited capitation fees and screening tests, established infrastructure and teacher standards, and mandated a 25% reservation in private schools for children from disadvantaged groups. Pedagogically, it introduced Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), embedding a child-centric approach. Thus, the Act represents not merely statutory reform but the constitutional fulfillment of the right to education.

5.4 Federal Dimensions: Education as a Concurrent Subject

The 42nd Amendment (1976) shifted education to the Concurrent List, granting both Union and State governments legislative competence. This dual jurisdiction necessitates cooperative federalism, yet often generates tensions over curriculum, language, and funding. The Supreme Court's 2025 ruling—declining to compel states to adopt NEP 2020—underscored that education reform remains a collaborative federal enterprise, shaped by subnational political realities.

5.5 NEP 2020 and Its Legal Underpinnings

The National Education Policy 2020 does not derive from a standalone enabling statute in the manner of the RTE Act. It is a policy document announced by the Government of India in July 2020 following recommendations by an expert committee headed by Dr. K. Kasturirangan, former Chairman of the Indian Space Research Organization (Aithal & Aithal, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2020). As a policy document rather than a law, NEP 2020 does not carry direct legal enforceability, but it directs the restructuring of existing statutory frameworks, regulatory bodies, and institutional arrangements. Its legal impact flows through its implementation by statutory bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and state-level education departments.

6. Major Government-Led Education Reforms: Policy Design and Implementation

6.1 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), 2001

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001, was India's flagship programme for achieving Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) in a time-bound manner, targeting universal enrolment for children aged 6 to 14 (Sayandita D. R., 2022). It was operationalized as a response to the 86th Constitutional Amendment and constituted a significant expansion of the Central government's financial and programmatic role in elementary education. The SSA encompassed interventions including school construction, teacher recruitment and training, provision of free textbooks and uniforms, remedial education for out-of-school children, and community-level governance structures such as Village Education Committees (VECs).

The SSA's scale was unprecedented: it sought to reach over 1 million habitations and more than 192 million children across India. The program was funded through a centrally sponsored model, with the Central government initially bearing 85% of the financial burden and states the remainder, though this ratio evolved over time. The government levied a 2% education cess on central taxes to fund SSA and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, reflecting the political seriousness attributed to elementary education universalization (Sayandita D. R., 2022).

Evaluations of SSA have yielded a mixed verdict. The Parliamentary Committee on Human Resource Development noted that enrolment was now nearly universal because of SSA (PRS India, 2016). Teacher recruitment was scaled up significantly, and substantial school infrastructure was created. However, learning outcomes remained far from satisfactory (PRS India, 2016). Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) consistently revealed that a significant proportion of children in upper primary grades were unable to read basic text or mathematical calculation a finding that pointed not merely to access deficits but to systemic quality failures. Funding insufficiency, irregular teacher attendance, and the inadequacy of the community governance model in resource-poor settings were identified as persistent implementation bottlenecks (Sayandita D. R., 2022).

6.2 Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), originally launched in 1995, was expanded significantly under the SSA framework. The MDMS provided hot cooked meals to school-going children with the dual objective of improving nutritional status and increasing school enrolment, attendance, and retention rates (PRS India, 2016; Brainly, 2024). The scheme became one of the largest school feeding programs in the world in terms of beneficiary coverage.

The impact of MDMS on enrolment incentivization has been widely documented. For many poor households, the guaranteed mid-day meal represented the child's only substantive nutritional intake, making school attendance economically rational for families otherwise likely to engage children in labour (Sayandita D. R., 2022). However, the scheme has also faced implementation challenges including food quality inconsistencies, hygiene problems, and occasional incidents of food contamination, particularly in under-resourced state facilities. The differential quality of implementation across states with Southern states generally outperforming Central and Northern states reflects the broader federalism challenge in Indian education reform.

6.3 Implementation Gaps in the RTE Act, 2009

Despite its transformative promise, the implementation of the RTE Act has been uneven. A decade after its enforcement, 1.7 million children (ages 6–14) remained out of school, alongside a shortage of 508,000 teachers. Dropout rates persisted, with the NSO reporting 17.87% at the primary level (2018–19). Quality concerns have been highlighted by ASER surveys, which found that nearly 50% of Class 5 students could not read Class 2 texts, with mathematics performance similarly weak. Infrastructure compliance—functional toilets, adequate classrooms, drinking water—remained incomplete, particularly in rural and tribal schools. The 25% EWS reservation in private schools, though progressive, triggered litigation, disputes, and widespread non-compliance. Meanwhile, the CCE policy, replacing high-stakes exams with formative assessment, drew criticism for weakening academic accountability and exacerbating learning deficits.

6.4 National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)

NEP 2020 represents India's most comprehensive education reform blueprint since 1986. Announced in July 2020, it outlines a transformative restructuring of the entire education

system—from early childhood to higher education—guided by the vision of India's aspirations for 2047 (ResearchGate/NEP2020 Higher Education, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2020). Among its most significant features are: the replacement of the existing 10+2 school structure with a 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical framework aligned with developmental stages; the emphasis on mother tongue and multilingual instruction at the foundational level; the introduction of a flexible multidisciplinary approach in higher education with multiple entry and exit options; the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as an overarching regulatory body; the target of raising public expenditure on education to 6% of GDP; and the emphasis on vocational, experiential, and digital learning (ResearchGate/NEP 2020 Theoretical Analysis, 2021; Ashokkumar T. et al, 2025).

The NEP 2020 explicitly aligns its goals with SDG 4, aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (ResearchGate/Critical Analysis SDGs, 2024). It has been described as a visionary policy framework that addresses many structural deficiencies of previous education policies (Kulal et al., 2024, in SAGE Journals). However, scholarly commentary has been cautious about implementation prospects.

Implementation challenges for NEP 2020 are substantial. The policy's own ambition - spanning restructuring school curricula, revamping teacher education, establishing new regulatory architecture, expanding digital infrastructure, and transforming pedagogical practice - demands resources and institutional capacity that many states do not currently possess (Sharma A. et al, 2023; IRJMETs, 2024). The requirement to raise public spending on education from approximately 4.6% of GDP to 6% requires significant fiscal reorientation, particularly against the backdrop of competing economic and health demands accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma A. et al, 2023). Resistance from non-Hindi-speaking states to the three-language formula, and disagreements about centralized curriculum frameworks that may limit regional linguistic and pedagogical diversity, have emerged as flashpoints (Idarps Journal, 2025; Education for All in India, 2025).

Empirical studies on early NEP 2020 implementation indicate that institutional support—including leadership involvement, digital infrastructure, and faculty development—is critical to the policy's success but remains unevenly distributed (ResearchGate/NEP 2020

Theoretical Analysis, 2021). The policy's ambitious implementation timeline targeting full realization by 2030 is widely regarded by scholars as optimistic given current resource and governance constraints (ResearchGate/NEP Skills Gap, 2025).

7. Comparative Analysis: India and Nigeria's Education Reform Trajectories

7.1 Overview of Nigerian Education Policy

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with over 200 million people and a federal governmental structure comprising 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. It shares important structural characteristics with India in its education reform context. Both countries are large, ethnically and linguistically diverse, operate federal democracies with significant rural populations, experience persistent poverty, and deep regional inequalities in educational access and quality (Yusuf & Ajere, 2000; World Bank, 2020). Nigeria's national education policy has evolved through several phases, from the post-colonial National Policy on Education of 1977, which established the 6-3-3-4 system of education, through successive revisions in 1981, 1998, 2004, and the current National Policy on Education (NPE) 2013 (SRJ Legal, 2024).

Nigeria's most significant basic education reform is the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme, launched by President Olusegun Obasanjo in September 1999 and subsequently backed by the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 (UBE Act). The UBE programme made 9 years of basic education, comprising 6 years of primary and 3 years of junior secondary education, free, universal, and compulsory (Wikipedia/UBEC, 2024; Centre for Public Impact, 2024). It established the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) as a federal agency to coordinate implementation and disburse funds to states. The programme is grounded in Nigeria's commitment to international frameworks including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the World Declaration on Education for All (1990).

7.2 Structural Parallels

The parallels between India's and Nigeria's education reform trajectories are striking. Both nations enacted legally backed frameworks for universal basic education within a few years of each other, India's RTE Act in 2009 and Nigeria's UBE Act in 2004, following years of softer policy commitments. Both reforms were anchored in constitutional frameworks emphasizing

education as a right: India through Article 21A and the 86th Amendment, and Nigeria through the Child Rights Act of 2003 and constitutional provisions under the 1999 Constitution (SRJ Legal, 2024). Both countries have grappled with the federalism problem: the tension between central policy mandates and the fiscal and administrative capacity of subnational governments to implement them.

The UNESCO review of Nigeria's education system in 2015 identified challenges remarkably similar to those documented in India's RTE implementation: low participation in primary education relative to the school-age population, low quality of teachers undermining learning achievement, inadequate infrastructure including toilets and furniture, weak data systems for education planning, social and cultural barriers to female participation, and a lack of enforcement of the UBE Act's compulsory education provisions (Centre for Public Impact, 2024). ASER reports in India and comparable assessments in Nigeria have both consistently found that an increase in enrolment does not automatically translate into learning outcome improvements.

7.3 Key Divergences

Although both India and Nigeria share structural similarities in their education frameworks, important divergences shape their outcomes. India's Article 21A (2002) constitutionalized elementary education as a Fundamental Right, enabling judicial enforcement through public interest litigation. Nigeria's right to basic education, though recognized under the Child Rights Act and UBE Act, suffers from weak enforcement, with thirteen states yet to adopt the Child Rights Act and federal limitations preventing compulsion of state compliance. This constitutional asymmetry gives India, at least in principle, stronger judicial accountability.

In terms of spending, India's education expenditure remains below the 6% GDP target, but proportionally higher than Nigeria's historically low allocations. Nigeria's learning-adjusted years of schooling (4.2 vs. expected 8.2) reveal a severe quality gap, arguably deeper than India's learning challenges. Policy design also diverges: India's NEP 2020, though criticized for limited state-level consultation, emerged from a broad national process led by the Kasturirangan Committee. Nigeria's UBE programme, largely federal-driven, lacked adequate state consultation, leading to misaligned implementation and funding disputes.

Finally, while both countries struggle with out-of-school children, Nigeria's numbers remain among the highest globally, exacerbated by conflict, insecurity in the northeast, and entrenched poverty. India's challenge, though significant in scale, has been mitigated through SSA and RTE interventions, with enrolment reaching 97.2% by 2018.

Overall, India's constitutional enforceability, relatively higher spending, and consultative policy design provide stronger institutional scaffolding, whereas Nigeria's deficits in enforcement, funding, and governance—compounded by conflict—pose deeper barriers to realizing universal education.

7.4 Lessons from the Comparison

The India and Nigeria comparison suggests that legal frameworks alone, whether in the form of constitutional amendments or enabling legislation, are insufficient to guarantee education reform success. What distinguishes more from less successful implementations is the quality of intergovernmental fiscal and administrative arrangements, the robustness of monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and the degree to which reforms are grounded in participatory design that secures stakeholder buy-in across levels of government. Both countries would benefit from stronger evidence-based policy cycles in which implementation data systematically feeds back into policy revision.

8. Policy–Implementation Gap Analysis

8.1 Conceptual Framework

The policy to implementation gap (the divergence between what a policy intends and what it delivers on the ground) is a central problem in public administration globally. In the context of education reform in developing federal systems, this gap is shaped by at least four overlapping explanatory dimensions: fiscal and resource deficits; bureaucratic and administrative capacity constraints; political and federalism tensions; and monitoring, evaluation, and accountability failures (Das et al., 2023). Each dimension is analytically traceable in the Indian education reform experience.

8.2 Fiscal and Resource Deficits

India's National Education Policy 2020 set a target of 6% of GDP for education spending, but actual expenditure has hovered around 4.6%, reflecting chronic underfunding that undermines infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and program sustainability. Fiscal responsibility is split: the Centre funds schemes like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, while states bear primary delivery costs, leaving poorer states—those with the greatest educational need—at a disadvantage. Central transfers and the 2% education cess have eased but not closed this gap, especially given NEP 2020's ambitious demands for digital infrastructure and teacher training, highlighting persistent structural inequities in India's education financing

8.3 Bureaucratic and Administrative Capacity Constraints

Implementation effectiveness is fundamentally a function of institutional and administrative capacity at the point of delivery. In India's education system, this point of delivery is typically the school, and the school's enabling environment is largely determined by block- and district-level education administration. Systematic reviews have identified teacher shortage, absenteeism, and qualification deficits as persistently damaging constraints. The Ministry of Human Resource Development's own reports acknowledged a shortage of approximately 508,000 teachers nationwide more than a decade into the RTE Act's operation (Wikipedia/RTE, 2024).

The quality of teacher education and professional development remains a critical bottleneck. While SSA and NEP 2020 both emphasize teacher training, the actual delivery of in-service training has been uneven, with rural and remote schools receiving the least support (Ashokkumar T. et al, 2025). Administrative burdens on teachers—including non-pedagogical duties such as election work, census enumeration, and administrative reporting—further reduce instructional time. The CCE framework introduced under the RTE Act, while pedagogically progressive, placed significant demands on teachers who lacked the training and support structures to implement it effectively, contributing to its eventual reform (Krishnamurthy A et al, 2021).

8.4 Federalism, Monitoring, and Accountability in Education Reforms.

At the same time, failures in monitoring and accountability compound these federal challenges. While India generates extensive data through DISE, UDISE, and ASER, its

translation into corrective policy action has been inconsistent. Reports by the CAG highlight fund diversion, project delays, and outcome shortfalls in schemes like SSA and MDMS. Grassroots accountability mechanisms—Village Education Committees and School Management Committees—have often proved ineffective in communities with low civic capacity. Thus, the challenge is not only to establish political legitimacy at the state level, but also to close accountability loops, ensuring that documented underperformance triggers meaningful intervention.

Together, these issues reveal how federal fragmentation and weak accountability systems interact to constrain India's education reforms, making effective implementation as much a matter of political negotiation and institutional integrity as of policy design.

9. Lessons for Public Policy and Reform Design

The systematic review of India's education reform experience, situated in the comparative context of Nigeria and analysed through the lens of policy to implementation gap theory, yields several cross-cutting lessons for public policy design and reform implementation that carry analytical relevance beyond the Indian subcontinent.

9.1 Constitutional Anchoring Enables but Does Not Guarantee Implementation

The insertion of Article 21A into India's Constitution through the 86th Amendment represented a powerful normative signal and created judicial accountability mechanisms for education delivery. However, over two decades of post-amendment experience demonstrate that constitutional anchoring is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reform effectiveness. Without concurrent investment in fiscal capacity, administrative infrastructure, and political will at the state and local level, constitutional guarantees may remain aspirational. Policy designers must therefore pair legal reform with implementation architecture.

9.2 Policy–Implementation Coherence Requires Participatory Design

Both India and Nigeria have experienced implementation failures attributable in part to insufficient consultation with subnational stakeholders in the design phase. Nigeria's UBE programme's lack of state consultation led to funding misalignments, while NEP 2020's resistance in several Indian states reflects concern about linguistic and cultural impositions from the Centre (Centre for Public Impact, 2024; Idarps Journal, 2025). Participatory design, where

state governments, local administrators, teachers, civil society, and communities are meaningfully involved in policy formulation, is more likely to produce implementation ownership and uptake. The lesson is that comprehensive national reform initiatives in federal systems require cooperative federalism by design, not as an afterthought.

9.3 Quality Must Be Central Alongside Access

A recurring finding across SSA, the RTE Act, and the UBE programme is that enrolment gains do not automatically produce learning outcome improvements. The policy emphasis on access, measured by enrolment ratios, school construction, and distance to school, was necessary but insufficient. ASER data from India and comparable assessments from Nigeria demonstrate that children enrolled in school may still be functionally illiterate years into their schooling (PRS India, 2016; World Bank, 2020). NEP 2020's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy through the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) represents a course correction, but implementing this emphasis at scale requires teacher quality improvements that are among the hardest governance challenges to address (IRJMETs, 2024; Ashokkumar T. et al, 2025).

9.4 Fiscal Adequacy and Equity Must Be Explicitly Designed

The 6% of GDP spending target for education has been enshrined in Indian policy documents since 1968 and has never been consistently met. This persistence of underfunding constitutes a design failure: fiscal commitments that are stated as targets without binding mechanisms or accountability consequences are systematically deferred. Future reform designs should incorporate binding fiscal commitments, independent monitoring of education expenditure, and equalization transfers that specifically address the resource gaps of poorer states and districts. Nigeria's analogous challenge—described as universally low public spending on education—reinforces the lesson that fiscal adequacy cannot be assumed; it must be structurally designed (World Bank, 2020; Sharma A. et al, 2023).

9.5 Teacher Policy Is the Fulcrum of Education Reform

Across every reform reviewed, teacher quality, including recruitment, preparation, deployment, professional development, and accountability, emerged as the fulcrum of implementation success or failure. India's teacher shortage of 508,000 (as reported after a decade of the RTE Act operation), Nigeria's characterisation of low teacher quality as the primary driver

of poor learning achievement, and NEP 2020's ambition to transform teacher education through a four-year integrated B.Ed. programmes all converge on the same diagnosis (Centre for Public Impact, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2020). Sustained investment in teacher quality, not merely as a policy statement but as a budgetary, institutional, and cultural commitment, is the single most consequential leverage point for education reform success.

9.6 Monitoring and Evaluation Must Drive Adaptive Management

The documented persistence of implementation gaps in Indian and Nigerian education reform, despite extensive policy frameworks and monitoring data, suggests that data collection alone is insufficient. Adaptive management, the institutionalized practice of using monitoring data to revise implementation strategies in real-time, must be deliberately built into reform architecture. This includes strengthening independent evaluation agencies, making school-level performance data publicly accessible, establishing clear consequences for sustained underperformance at administrative levels, and empowering grassroots community monitoring mechanisms with real authority (Sharma A. et al, 2023).

10. Discussion

The analysis presented in this study highlights a central paradox in India's education system: the coexistence of expanded access and limited learning outcomes. This paradox, conceptualised as the Access vs Quality divide, emerges not as an incidental outcome of policy failure, but as a structurally produced condition shaped by the interaction of policy design, implementation processes, and broader socio-economic dynamics.

10.1 Reinterpreting Policy Success

At one level, government-led education reforms in India can be considered a success. The expansion of schooling infrastructure, near-universal enrolment at the primary level, and reduction in gender disparities represent significant achievements. These outcomes reflect the state's capacity to mobilise resources and implement large-scale programmes aimed at inclusion.

However, when evaluated through the lens of learning outcomes, this narrative of success becomes more complex. Evidence from large-scale assessments and field observations indicates that many students are not acquiring foundational skills despite years of schooling. This suggests that conventional indicators of success, such as enrolment and retention, provide an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of educational progress. The discussion thus calls for a redefinition of policy success, shifting the focus from participation to meaningful learning.

10.2 Structural Explanation of the Access vs Quality Divide

The persistence of the Access vs Quality divide can be understood as the outcome of three interrelated structural dynamics. First, policy design has historically prioritised universalisation, driven by normative commitments to equity and inclusion. While this focus has been essential, it has also resulted in a disproportionate emphasis on quantitative indicators.

Second, implementation challenges, including limited state capacity, weak accountability mechanisms, and bureaucratic constraints, have limited the effectiveness of policy interventions. The gap between policy intent and practice is therefore central to understanding educational outcomes.

Third, social inequalities continue to shape educational experiences, influencing both access to resources and the ability to benefit from schooling. These inequalities operate within and beyond the education system, reinforcing disparities in learning outcomes.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the Access vs Quality divide is not a temporary imbalance but a structural feature of the system.

10.3 Governance and Institutional Dynamics

The findings of this study underscore the importance of governance and institutional capacity in shaping educational outcomes. The effectiveness of education reforms depends not only on policy content but on the ability of institutions to implement and sustain change. The analysis reveals a tendency towards compliance-oriented governance, where institutions prioritise adherence to formal requirements over substantive outcomes. This is reflected in the focus on infrastructure development, enrolment targets, and administrative procedures, often at the expense of pedagogical quality. Improving educational outcomes, therefore requires a shift towards outcome-oriented governance, characterised by:

- Stronger accountability mechanisms
- Enhanced teacher support and training
- Continuous monitoring of learning outcomes

10.4 Implications for Policy and Reform

The analysis has several important implications for the future of education reform in India. There is a need to move beyond a binary focus on access versus quality, towards an integrated approach that recognises their interdependence. Expanding access remains essential, but it must be accompanied by sustained efforts to improve learning. Moreover, policy reforms must address the institutional foundations of education, including teacher training, administrative capacity, and governance structures. Without strengthening these foundations, improvements in quality are unlikely to be sustained. Thus, there is a need to incorporate context-sensitive approaches that account for regional variations and socio-economic inequalities. Uniform policy

frameworks may not be sufficient to address diverse educational challenges. Finally, the findings highlight the importance of redefining educational priorities, placing greater emphasis on learning outcomes, critical thinking, and student engagement.

10.5 Towards a More Comprehensive Understanding of Education

This study contributes to a broader rethinking of education reform by emphasising that access and quality are not sequential stages but simultaneous and interconnected objectives. The persistence of the Access vs Quality divide suggests that achieving one without the other leads to incomplete and potentially unsustainable outcomes. A more comprehensive approach to education must therefore integrate:

- Policy design with implementation realities
- Quantitative expansion with qualitative improvement
- Institutional reform with social inclusion

Such an approach requires not only technical adjustments but a fundamental reorientation of how education is conceptualised and evaluated.

10.6 Sustainability of Government-led Education Policies in India

The sustainability of India's education reforms hinges on their ability to adapt to evolving socio-economic realities while maintaining continuity across political cycles. Earlier frameworks, such as the Right to Education Act (2009), established a legal foundation for universal access, but challenges in infrastructure and teacher quality limited long-term impact. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, as a revised vision, emphasizes holistic learning, not only providing the infrastructure but also having creative teachers or coaches, which will allow students to learn these models in the right direction with proper usage, similarly digital integration, and vocational training opens space for new ideas and interaction among different culture will also flourish with new vibe, aiming to correct systemic gaps.

Here Sustainability requires three critical elements: institutional capacity, financial commitment, and community ownership. Policies often falter when implementation depends on short-term schemes without adequate monitoring. For instance, digital initiatives introduced during the pandemic highlighted the potential of technology but also exposed the rural-urban divide, raising questions about equitable sustainability. Similarly, multilingual education and vocational training demand consistent investment in teacher training and curriculum development to remain viable.

The revised NEP framework shows promise by embedding flexibility and lifelong learning, but its endurance depends on policy resilience, the ability to withstand political transitions and economic fluctuations. Without robust evaluation mechanisms and inclusive stakeholder

participation, reforms risk becoming episodic rather than transformative. Thus, sustainability lies not only in visionary design but in continuous adaptation, equitable resource distribution, and long-term accountability structures, in which societal support for the development of the new minds with deep-rooted human-oriented studies will help.

11. Conclusion

This systematic review of government-led education reforms in India has traced the evolution of India's education policy landscape from its constitutional foundations through successive programmatic reforms; Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and the National Education Policy 2020; evaluating each against the evidence of implementation and outcomes. The analysis reveals a pattern that is simultaneously encouraging and sobering: India has achieved remarkable progress in enrolment universalization, school infrastructure expansion, and policy ambition, but has persistently fallen short on learning outcomes, equity of implementation, fiscal adequacy, and reform coherence in a federal context.

The comparative analysis with Nigeria's education reform experience, particularly the Universal Basic Education programme, illuminates that the challenges India faces are not idiosyncratic but reflect deeper structural tensions in large federal developing countries between normative aspiration and institutional capacity. Both countries have demonstrated that legal frameworks and policy blueprints are necessary but insufficient conditions for education reform success. The quality of implementation, shaped by fiscal architecture, administrative capacity, federalism dynamics, and accountability systems, ultimately determines whether policies fulfil their transformative promise.

The policy to implementation gap in Indian education reform is not a product of absence of vision, political commitment, or legal foundations. It is a product of the organizational and fiscal complexity of delivering change at scale in a profoundly diverse federal system. Addressing this gap requires not merely new policies but a fundamentally stronger implementation ecosystem: well-resourced state education administrations, qualified and motivated teachers, functional monitoring and feedback loops, and a cooperative federal

framework in which national policy goals and state implementation realities are genuinely reconciled.

As India pursues the ambitious transformations outlined in NEP 2020, and as Nigeria and other developing countries navigate analogous reform challenges, the lessons distilled from this review offer a practical roadmap: anchor reforms constitutionally and legally, but invest equally in the institutional infrastructure of delivery; design with participation, implement with flexibility, and evaluate with rigor; make teacher quality the highest reform priority; and commit to fiscal adequacy through binding mechanisms rather than aspirational targets. Education reform is ultimately a long-term endeavour, and its success is measured not in policy documents but in the learning levels and life opportunities of millions of children.

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