Challenges And Opportunities In Environmental Education Within The Framework Of India's National Education Policy

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Abstract:

The global community is currently grappling with the challenges of environmental degradation and pollution, primarily driven by the excessive exploitation of natural resources by humanity in pursuit of unplanned development through rapid scientific and industrial advancements. It is imperative that we now implement measures for environmental restoration alongside conservation efforts, facilitated by effective environmental education to ensure a sustainable future for society. India possesses significant potential to offer the essential environmental educational framework required globally, owing to its rich natural resources.

The Indian education system is undergoing transformation through the introduction of the new National Education Policy, which aims to tackle prevalent environmental issues and their solutions from early childhood education through to postgraduate and research levels. This paper reviews the current status of environmental education, highlighting its key components and challenges, while also evaluating its alignment with the newly adopted education policy.

Key words: New Education Policy, Environmental Science, Environmental Education, Future challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

The environment comprises a collective of all living organisms and non-living elements. The existence and interactions of these components significantly impact human life. The biotic elements include animals, plants, forests, fisheries, microbes, and birds, while the abiotic components consist of water, land, sunlight, rocks, and air. The process of educating individuals about environmental issues and challenges related to these biotic and abiotic elements is known as environmental education. This form of education instills ethical values in individuals, highlighting their responsibilities regarding their interactions with both living and non-living components. It imparts essential knowledge about environmental protection, conservation, and preservation, tailored to specific circumstances and governing conditions. Furthermore, environmental education promotes the resolution of environmental challenges through informed understanding and sustainable practices.

Education serves to transmit and refresh knowledge through cultural exchange and renewal, particularly among adult members of society, while also guiding the development of infants and young children, thereby shaping them into cultured individuals across various aspects of life. Similar to the broader concept of education, environmental education involves the transmission and renewal of concepts, knowledge, and ideas in learners, fostering an understanding of their surroundings and the life forms within it. It often manifests as training that encourages children to engage in specific activities at designated times throughout the day. Environmental education allows individuals to explore environmental interactions at their own pace and in their own manner, accommodating natural behaviors and the accepted standards of human society.

Environmental education serves as a crucial pillar for the sustainable prosperity of a nation, fostering healthy societal development and individual advancement. A strong and equitable approach to environmental education is essential for shaping the future of human society. Consequently, governments around the globe allocate significant resources to develop and implement environmental education policies through both formal and informal educational frameworks.

Education is often viewed as the bedrock of a nation's progress, societal well-being, and personal development. An effective education system plays a vital role in shaping society and ensuring a brighter future. Therefore, governments prioritize and invest heavily in the education sector, adopting comprehensive education policies. The successful implementation of these policies enhances the effectiveness and responsiveness of educational, societal, and developmental initiatives. Such a system not only promotes technological advancements but also meets societal expectations.

India's educational policy has undergone considerable evolution over the years, characterized by changes in approaches, technological progress, and societal demands. The New Education Policy of 2020 has been designed to adapt to the common needs of society, address emerging challenges, and respond to the evolving demands of the 21st century. This policy is anticipated to play a pivotal role in transforming the educational landscape of the country, aiming to ensure equitable resource distribution, encourage innovation, significantly contribute to research, promote overall growth, and address societal needs.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Environmental Education equips individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to address environmental challenges by instilling ethical values and fostering attitudes, mindsets, motivation, and commitment to making informed and equitable decisions through responsible actions [1]. As the urgency to tackle environmental issues has increased, the significance of Environmental Education has risen globally, highlighted by the initial global declaration, previously referred to as the Stockholm Declaration on Environmental Education, which was adopted by UNESCO in 1972 [2].

The importance of Environmental Education became more pronounced following the release of the Brundtland Report, commonly known as Our Common Future [3]. This report shifted the emphasis of environmental education towards sustainable development, economic advancement, environmental conservation, and social equity, particularly following the adoption of Agenda 21 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Earth Summit, in 1992 [4].

The roots of Environmental Education can be linked to the environmental movements aimed at conserving nature and its resources [5]. It was first integrated into formal education systems in the early 1970s as part of the Science curriculum [6]. Subsequently, it was included in educational programs across various levels, encompassing primary and secondary schools, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate studies in fields such as geology, botany, zoology, microbiology, ecology, and geography. In the 1980s, Environmental Education was adopted to raise awareness through formal education, thereby enhancing public concern for environmental issues [7]. Chapter 26 of Agenda 21, developed by UNESCO, emphasized the need to

incorporate environmental education at the primary and secondary school levels and advocated for its continuation to foster sustainable development [8].

Environmental Education programs integrated into formal school systems can profoundly influence individuals' relationships with nature and cultivate the essential desire for sustainable living and learning [9]. A substantial body of literature highlights the critical role of environmental education in promoting human well-being and sustainable practices.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

An analysis was conducted on the New Education Policy 2020 alongside previous Indian Education Policy documents, focusing on the inclusion of environmental elements within both formal and informal education systems. Relevant international environmental policies adopted by global communities were examined and linked to the Indian education framework concerning environmental education. Additionally, a review of the environmental components throughout historical periods, including the pre-British era, the British period, and the post-independence era, was undertaken to trace their evolution over time, employing a well-established review methodology.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The term "environment" broadly encompasses nature and all external factors, including their interactions, influences, and various circumstances that impact all forms of life. The process of enlightening human society about these aspects of nature and human interactions through both formal and informal education is known as environmental education. The New Education Policy-2020 has been designed as a framework to reclaim, articulate, and reshape India's position as a global leader, emphasizing principles of equity, equality, and fraternity while transforming the nation into a Global Education Hub. Consequently, it is essential to assess environmental components and their integration with appropriate perspectives for improved outcomes. In this context, the elements of environmental education within the Indian education system have been evaluated in relation to the New Education Policy-2020, as discussed below.

4.1. Aim of New Policy: Recognizing that education, both formal and informal, serves as a powerful instrument for fostering economic development and enhancing social mobility, the new education policy seeks to incorporate these educational modes. The recently implemented National Education Policy 2020 in India marks the first education policy of the twenty-first century, focusing on the integration of technological advancements and a strong emphasis on research within the educational framework. This policy is designed to meet the increasing demands of national development through modern resources and to position the country as a global center for education.

4.2. Ancient Education in India:

A review of the literature indicates a lack of credible literary sources that provide authentic information for comprehending educational policies in ancient India. Thinkers from that era viewed education as a means to instill a virtuous way of life within Indian culture and society. It was designed to guide the uninformed individual towards a path of intellectual growth, progress, morality, and virtue. Historical evidence suggests that students in ancient India were well-equipped to navigate life through an educational system that was limitless in scope. Educators of that time believed in the importance of engaging in research and contributing to the development of an advanced body of knowledge essential for their lives.

4.3. Education Policy evolution in India:

Prior to independence, India lacked a cohesive education policy due to the presence of diverse kingdoms and various other factors. The educational framework during the pre-independence era was markedly different from the current system. The evolution of education policy in India can be examined through distinct historical phases, including the Pre-British and British periods, as well as the developments following independence. Key milestones include the University Education Commission of 1948, the Secondary Education Commission of 1952, and the Indian Education Commission led by D.S. Kothari (Kothari Commission) from 1964 to 1966. Additionally, the National Policy on Education was introduced in 1968, followed by another policy in 1979, further reforms in 1986, and subsequent updates in 1992.

4.3.1. India Education during British Period:

The education system in India during the British colonial era was instrumental in shaping the country's educational framework. The introduction of Western education marked a significant historical milestone, influencing the development of educational policies in India at that time. However, it is important to note that a cohesive educational policy was not established during this period. The British government served as the primary authority in determining the direction of education in India, overseeing the establishment, management, and operation of numerous schools and colleges across the nation. The implementation of Western education resulted in the emergence of a large number of educated Indians, who were instructed by British educators. The primary aim of this Western education was to create a workforce of clerks to support the administrative functions of the British government. The British played a crucial role in promoting modern education in India, encompassing both liberal and technical disciplines, which contributed to progressive advancements in the country.

4.3.2. Education Policy in Independent India:

Following India's independence, the British government initiated separate efforts to develop the country's education system. Once power was transferred from the British to Indian leaders, the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) established two commissions. One commission focused on university education, while the other addressed secondary education. In 1950, India adopted its Constitution, which included specific provisions regarding the education of its citizens. With the adoption of the Constitution, the responsibility for the education of Indian citizens was shared by both state and central governments. The Constitution of India not only highlighted the principle of "equality of educational opportunity" through various provisions but also aimed to achieve necessary social justice through its educational policies.

5. INDIA EDUCATION REFORMS:

The evolution of the Indian education system has consistently progressed from its inception to the present day. The first commission established in independent India was the University Education Commission in 1948, led by Dr. Radhakrishnan. This commission's report highlighted the need for various improvements in Indian university education, proposing enhancements that were tailored to meet the needs of India at that time and in the future. Subsequently, the Government of India created a distinct commission for secondary education, known as the Mudaliar Commission, which was formed in 1952. This was followed by the Indian Education Commission, commonly referred to as the Kothari Commission. Based on the Kothari Commission's recommendations, the National Educational Policy of 1968 was developed and implemented, with further reforms introduced in 1992. As modern technologies rapidly advanced and became integral to educational systems worldwide, there arose a necessity for a new vision and reforms within the education sector. Consequently, a New National Policy on Education was established. This policy aims to transform the current Indian education system to align with the contemporary needs of the populace, enabling them to adapt to the evolving global landscape. The National Policy on Education, introduced in 1986, primarily aimed to ensure education for all segments of Indian society, with a particular focus on marginalized groups, including scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward classes, and women.

6. NEED OF NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020:

The Indian education policy of 1986 proved insufficient as it failed to adapt to the rapid advancements in educational aids necessary to tackle social and economic disparities, as well as cultural diversity within the country. Consequently, various state governments have repeatedly launched different support services and educational initiatives at multiple levels to mitigate these inequalities. Notably, the 1986 policy lacked measures to regulate the rapid proliferation of private educational institutions across the nation. It became evident that many states were struggling to provide quality education. State governments granted permissions for educational operations without implementing essential reforms, inadvertently fostering the growth of private educational entities. These circumstances highlighted the urgent need for a new education policy that would adopt a revised approach and a clear vision to establish a unified education system or a widely accepted quality assessment framework within the education sector. Such measures are crucial for addressing these challenges and ensuring a better future for the country in light of emerging issues. The

New Education Policy of 2020 has been developed to tackle these concerns and position India as a global educational hub.

7. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN NEW POLICY:

The New Education Policy 2020 has been crafted to address future needs and challenges. Among these challenges, environmental education is anticipated to play a significant role due to the escalating complexity of environmental issues. The policy emphasizes environmental education as a key element in tackling these challenges at both local and global levels. It aims to integrate environmental education with Indian cultural values, thereby fostering social, ethical, and moral human values while enhancing the emotional resilience of learners. A well-structured environmental component within the new education policy is expected to promote simultaneous advancements in cognitive skills, foundational reading and numeracy, as well as higher-order cognitive abilities such as critical thinking and problem-solving, ultimately contributing to human well-being.

The New Education Policy 2020 has been established to implement significant reforms in both the school and higher education systems. This policy will supersede the previous Indian Education Policy of 1986, introducing access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability as its foundational pillars. The new policy recognizes the importance of environmental education, incorporating it at various educational levels. At the elementary stage, environmental education is presented as Environmental Studies (EVS). This subject addresses the physical, biological, and socio-cultural dimensions of the environment, focusing on the preservation and conservation of nature for students in grades III to V, in accordance with the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF 2005).

The NCF 2005 indicates that environmental education is not a standalone subject but is integrated into various disciplines, including science, mathematics, humanities, social sciences, regional studies, sports, cultural studies, and languages. However, this integration may not effectively address or resolve environmental challenges. The blending of environmental topics into traditional subjects has resulted in a dilution of environmental knowledge, leading to a lack of coherence in understanding these issues comprehensively. There is a pressing need for environmental education to be treated as a distinct component to ensure consistency in environmental topics within the educational framework, ultimately yielding practical outcomes rather than merely descriptive knowledge. This approach has the potential to transform India into a dynamic, application-oriented knowledge hub on the global stage.

8. CONCLUSION:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the essential integration of education with a focus on fostering environmental awareness and sensitivity towards conservation and sustainable development. Key recommendations of NEP 2020 regarding the environment are embedded within the core school curricula, aiming to raise awareness about the conservation of water and other resources. The curriculum incorporates contemporary subjects at appropriate educational stages, blending traditional knowledge systems with modern environmental aspirations. While this approach may instill values and respect for the environment, it is unlikely to create employment opportunities without a cohesive integration of all scientific and technological knowledge related to the environment. This integration can only be achieved through the establishment of Environmental Education as a distinct subject across various disciplines, including Arts, Science, Commerce, Engineering, or Technology. Instead of merely integrating environmental awareness, there is a pressing need for scientific observation, field exposure, and research to analyze issues and develop problem-solving skills, which are crucial for sustainable development. This aspect is currently lacking and requires a comprehensive understanding, dedicated scientific efforts, and the attention of policymakers.

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