

India's Journey in Primary Education: An Overview Since Colonial Times

Sourav Chatterjee¹, Dr. Ajay Samir Kujur²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Education, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur

²Associate Professor, Department of Education, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur

Abstract:

This insightful article provides a fascinating examination of the evolution of primary education in India, from its early days under British rule to the present day. It shares how different political systems, influential commissions, and essential laws have shaped the education landscape, highlighting both ongoing challenges and inspiring changes. The paper effectively explains key policies, such as focusing on teaching in local languages and hands-on learning, as well as current efforts to make education accessible to everyone, improve quality, and ensure that children learn to read and write. Overall, it provides a warm and inviting overview of India's efforts to establish a fair and effective primary education system, highlighting key milestones and achievements along the way.

Keywords: Primary education, India, political systems, fundamental policies, universal accessibility.

Introduction

Primary education lays the foundation for human growth and societal progress. In India, its development is deeply connected to the country's political and social history, reflecting significant shifts from colonial rule to independence and the pursuit of modern ambitions. This article provides a chronological overview of the evolution of primary education in India, spanning the British colonial period, the post-independence era, and recent reforms. It thoughtfully reviews the recommendations of major commissions and policies, considers their effects, and highlights ongoing challenges that shape today's education scene. The report is organised into key historical phases, each exploring the policies, challenges, and reforms of that time, leading up to a discussion on current efforts and future opportunities.

To establish a foundational understanding of the historical progression of primary education in India, Table 1 provides a chronological overview of important commissions, reports, policies, and acts, emphasising their main focuses and recommendations. This table acts as a quick reference, offering a clear view of how priorities have evolved and illustrating the ongoing, often iterative, nature of educational reform efforts over time. By presenting the key focus alongside the year and name, it distinctly shows the development of ideas and policy priorities, helping readers to place subsequent detailed discussions about each policy or commission within the broader historical context.

Table 1: Key Policies and Commissions on Primary Education of India (1882-2020)

Year	Name of Commission/	Key Focus/Recommendation
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	Report/Policy/Act	
1882	Indian Education Commission	Expansion and enhancement of primary education for the masses through vernacular languages; the state's vigorous efforts are directed towards elementary education.
1910	Gokhale's Resolution	Advocated for free and compulsory elementary education nationwide; the bill was rejected.
1929	Hartog Committee Report	Highlighted "blatant inefficiency and waste" in the primary system due to low retention in Class IV.
1937 (June)	Abbot-Wood Report	Emphasised activity-based learning, mother tongue as a medium of instruction, and three-year pre-service teacher training.
1937 (Dec)	Zakir Husain Committee Report	First comprehensive report on national education, influenced by Gandhi; echoed activity-based learning, mother tongue, and three-year teacher training.
1937	First Conference of National Education (Wardha)	Adopted principles of Basic Education: free and compulsory education for seven years, mother tongue, manual labour-centred education, craft-linked training.
1944	Sargent Plan (Post-War Educational Development in India)	Advised universal, free, and compulsory education for 6-14 year olds within 40 years (by 1985).
1948	Kher Committee	Recommended universal basic education for 6-11 year olds by 1958 and 6-14 year olds by 1964.
1955	Assessment Committee on Basic Education (Shri G. Ramachandran)	It is recommended that the entire primary curriculum be geared towards basic education, beyond the "Compact Area Method."
1959	National Seminar on Orientation of Elementary Schools Towards the Basic Pattern	Accepted recommendation to orient the whole primary curriculum towards a basic pattern; emphasised holistic activities and community engagement.
1960	Article 45 of the Indian Constitution	Mandated free and compulsory education for all children up to 14 years by 1960 (deadline repeatedly missed).
1964-	Education Commission	Proposed deadlines for universal education (5 years by 1975-76, 7 years by 1985-86); emphasised

1966		reducing "waste and inertia" (drop-out rates) and improving quality.
1970	National Seminar on Primary and Work-Oriented Education	Promoted Gandhian ideals, work-oriented education, preschool education, and teacher proficiency.
1986	National Education Policy (NEP 1986)	Focused on universal enrollment and retention up to age 14, non-formal education, and rising calibre of instruction.
2001-2002	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	Flagship initiative for Universal Elementary Education (UEE) for 6-14 year olds by 2010; consolidated previous programs.
2009	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act	Made education for 6-14 year olds a fundamental right (effective April 1, 2010); ensured free and compulsory education.
2005	National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005)	Elementary school (Class I-VIII) as compulsory; it emphasised holistic development, arts, crafts, work experience, and process-oriented instruction.
2020	National Education Policy (NEP 2020)	Introduced "Preparatory Class" (Balavatika) for under 5s; prioritised achieving foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) for all children by 2025 through a National Mission.

Foundations of Primary Education in British India (Pre-Independence Era)

The early development of formal primary education in India was a crucial step in establishing a system of primary schools during the British colonial period. While various priorities of the colonial administration drove this effort, it importantly laid down foundational principles that still influence educational discussions today.

Early Commissions and the State's Shifting Emphasis

The first notable investigation into education was conducted by the Indian Education Commission (1882-1883). This commission's inquiry focused on the current state of primary education across the empire, aiming to identify ways to expand and improve its quality. One of the most important recommendations was that the state's efforts should be more concentrated on elementary education for the population. It also proposed that primary education should involve teaching individuals in their own languages, skills that would assist them in daily life, and that this education should extend to remote regions. Vernacular education was a key concept repeatedly emphasised by this commission, not only in its own reports but also in later reports by Abbot-Wood and Zakir Husain, highlighting the importance of vernacular education in their teachings and its practical role in achieving mass

literacy. This ongoing emphasis established a significant precedent for language policy in post-independent India.

Gokhale's resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council on March 19, 1910, was a heartfelt effort to promote mass compulsory education. Although it ultimately didn't succeed, it represented a genuine effort to make elementary education free and mandatory nationwide. The bill faced a tough ten-day debate, which ultimately discredited it and marked the first real political and practical opposition to the idea of universal compulsory education. Several concerns, including the costs and administrative challenges associated with such an ambitious plan, contributed to this resistance. This early experience showed that achieving universal education isn't simple; it often encounters obstacles from operational issues and political disagreements rather than just legal hurdles.

The push to examine our education system more closely was highlighted in the Hartog Committee Report of 1929. It raised significant concerns about why the education system often seemed inefficient and wasteful. Specifically, it pointed out that in primary education—which is crucial for building literacy and helping students become active, informed citizens—there was a worrying trend: many students drop out early, and few reach Class IV, where we can reasonably expect them to be literate. The findings from this report were some of the first clues about the longstanding issues of student drop-out and stagnation. These concerns resurfaced after independence, accompanied by more detailed statistics that highlighted the problem. The fact that this issue has continued over time shows that the cycle of losing students early and failing to establish basic literacy is a deeply rooted systemic challenge. Addressing it requires comprehensive, systemic efforts that consider the broader socioeconomic and structural contexts to develop holistic, wide-ranging solutions.

The Emergence of Indigenous Educational Thought

The Basic Education of Mahatma Gandhi:

During the late British period, developments emerged in the realm of native educational philosophies, with the principal one being the concept of Basic Education advocated by Mahatma Gandhi. This progressive idea is documented in two significant texts from 1937: the Abbot-Wood Report in June and the Zakir Husain Committee Report in December. The Abbot-Wood Report asserts that the primary school curriculum should be primarily informed by the natural interests and occupations of children, rather than solely by textbook knowledge. It also endorses the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the high school level. Furthermore, it recommends a three-year pre-service teacher training program for primary and intermediate school educators following the completion of middle school.

The ideas were reinforced in the Zakir Husain Committee Report, considered the first detailed account of modern India's national education, published six months later. It drew heavily from Mahatma Gandhi's vision, the concept of a free India, and the rise of a new social order. The report also included ideas like activity-based education through the mother tongue and a three-year teacher training programme, with a tone rooted in Indian educational thought. The focus on teacher training, mother tongue, and activity-based learning—via

figures such as Abbot-Wood, Zakir Husain, and the Wardha Conference—showed an acceptance of best practice pedagogy within the Indian context before independence, indicating a move away from colonial influences. This intellectual convergence signifies the emergence of an indigenous educational perspective, aimed at developing a system more aligned with Indian needs and culture, thereby laying the groundwork for India's primary education policy post-independence.

Gandhi's vision for the Basic Education programme was truly transformative. When the Congress Ministries took charge of seven provinces in 1937, they faced the challenge of implementing universal, free, and compulsory elementary education without enough funding. Gandhi's inspiring solution was a self-sustaining, free system that lasted seven years and included productive crafts, making education practical and achievable despite financial hurdles. These innovative ideas sparked lively discussions at the First Conference of National Education in Wardha on October 22nd and 23rd, 1937. The conference adopted several key principles: seven years of free and compulsory education, instruction in the mother tongue, education through manual work, and training closely tied to primary crafts. The positive reception of Gandhi's ideas, along with their inclusion in the Zakir Husain Report and the Wardha Conference, shows how critical financial considerations were in shaping these efforts. This approach laid the groundwork for educational policies in India, which have always balanced idealistic goals with real-world resource challenges.

Pre-Independence Plans for Universalisation

In the later years of British rule, a comprehensive educational development plan was introduced. The Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education on Post-War Educational Development in India (1944), known as the Sargent Plan, provided an encouraging overview of education in India. It kindly proposed that the aim should be to establish a system of free and universal education for all boys and girls aged six to fourteen, and to achieve this objective promptly. The plan also candidly acknowledged that accomplishing this goal could require over 40 years, given the considerable challenge of securing sufficient qualified teachers. Even before independence, many recognised the enormity of the task to make education accessible to all in India within the 40-year timeframe of the Sargent Plan, which was set for completion by 1985. This period did not overlook the numerous demographic and infrastructural obstacles, particularly concerning the shortage of human resources and teachers necessary for such a substantial undertaking. This pragmatic approach set a positive precedent for future initiatives, demonstrating that large-scale goals often necessitate extended timelines and face significant challenges, especially in the pursuit of rapid educational development.

Journey of Primary Education in the Post-Independence Era

Universalisation Efforts and Policy Evolution

After India gained independence in 1947, the newly established national government focused on primary education and the development of the educational system. Following independence, there was a push towards high constitutional aims, with various commissions and seminars formed to achieve an ideal primary education for all.

Constitutional Mandates and Early Initiatives

Article 45 of the Indian Constitution was a vital directive that mandated free and compulsory education for all children under the age of 14 by 1960. It was recognised that the Sargent Plan's duration of 40 years was adequate, and there was a strong sense of urgency to shorten this period. As a result, the Kher Committee was established in 1948 to examine how education in India could be developed and financed, chaired by Shri B.C. Kher. The committee proposed that compulsory universal basic education for all children aged six to eleven should be implemented within ten years (by 1958), and universal basic education for all children aged six to fourteen should be achieved within sixteen years (by 1964). The Government of India adopted these recommendations.

Although the period following independence experienced substantial development, achieving the objectives outlined in Article 45 proved to be a challenging task. The 1960 deadline was repeatedly postponed, initially to 1970, then to 1976, and ultimately to 1988, with the Sixth Five-Year Plan establishing a target of 1990. The failure to fully realise these constitutional deadlines for universal education is attributable to deeply rooted systemic issues. In 1957, a panel of the Planning Commission identified numerous challenges, including insufficient resources, rapid population growth, poverty, widespread illiteracy, societal resistance to female education, a high proportion of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, inertial attitudes in underdeveloped regions, and parental indifference. This demonstrates that the process of universalisation was a complex socio-economic and logistical endeavour that could not be addressed solely through political will; instead, it necessitated a more comprehensive, multidimensional strategy beyond mere legal mandates.

Major Commissions and their Recommendations

Multiple committees and seminars were convened during this period to address the complexities inherent in primary education. Misconceptions and prejudices regarding fundamental education prompted the formation of the Assessment Committee on Basic Education in 1955, under the leadership of Shri G. Ramachandran. The committee observed that the former approach to implementing basic education, known as the Compact Area Method, had become inadequate. It emphasised that the entire primary school curriculum should be aligned with the objectives of basic education. This represented a paradigmatic shift in educational philosophy, moving away from the notion of treating certain types of education or initial instruction as experimental or disconnected from broader primary activities. The new strategy facilitated the integration of work experience and vocational components into general curricula, an emphasis that persists in contemporary policies. The committee advanced several recommendations, including that the Indian government publicly endorse the concept of basic education, organise regular conferences, establish the Central Research Institute of Basic Education, and appoint a Special Committee to evaluate standards. It also proposed that state governments designate all elementary schools as basic schools, supply necessary equipment and raw materials, market surplus outputs, and render basic education economically sustainable. Additionally, focus was placed on improving teacher training- enhancing effectiveness and relevance, providing comprehensive craft

training, engaging in the preparation of reading material manuscripts, planning extension courses, and establishing residential training institutions to foster cooperative living.

In 1959, a significant national seminar was held to guide elementary schools toward a basic, inspiring pattern. The seminar suggested organising the entire primary curriculum around this core idea, introducing orientation programmes that highlight healthy living, civic responsibility, social connections, environmental awareness, and fun cultural or recreational activities. It also emphasised the importance of training head teachers and inspectors through these programmes, creating suitable school materials with Community Development Programme funds, and encouraging local community voluntary funding to equip the schools better. This approach aimed to foster a supportive and holistic educational environment.

The objectives of universal education were subsequently revised by an education commission (1964–1966). It is recommended that all children should receive the most appropriate and acceptable education within five years, by 1975-1976, throughout all regions of the country, and within seven years, by 1985-1986. The Commission anticipated substantial quantitative growth, estimating that in 1965-66, there were 50 million enrollments in Classes I through VI, which was projected to increase to 125 million enrollments by 1985-86, necessitating an additional 75 million enrollments in Classes I-VII over the following 20 years. This vision aligns with the Sargent Plan for universal education in 1985. The commission also emphasised two primary elements: reducing "waste and inertia" and enhancing "quality." Of the students who commenced Class I, only 34 out of 100 progressed to Class VII. The commission recommended that all children starting in Class I should steadily advance to Class V, with at least 80 per cent reaching Class VII, ensuring no failure or dissatisfaction occurs before Class V. This addresses the "waste" criticised years ago by the Hartog Committee and indicates that years of policymaking have made limited progress in ensuring sufficient student progression. An additional significant concern was that, in many instances, the rapid increase in enrollment led to a decline in quality, with standards only vaguely defined—children often learning only what was necessary to pass and advance, without reading beyond the basic level, with the hope that elementary education would impart the essential skills for societal contribution.

During the process, the primary educational principles were also promoted at the National Seminar on Primary and Work-Oriented Education, organised in 1970 by the National Council of Educational Research and Training. The seminar emphasised the link between preschool education curricula and the child's family and neighbourhood, as well as the involvement of voluntary organisations in furthering preschool education. Additionally, it highlighted the transformation of primary teacher training through the incorporation of principles from childcare and preschool education. These initial discussions also indicate a cautious approach to early childhood education as a foundation for primary education, foreshadowing a considerably greater focus on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in future policies, particularly in the NEP 2020 with its inclusion of a Preparatory Class. The seminar also reaffirmed Gandhian traditions, such as the dignity of manual work, social service, a non-secular outlook, and character formation (including fearlessness, truth, non-violence, purity, and service to peacefulness). It underscored the social importance of work

experience, its physical aspects, and the development of the child's overall personality, without overly emphasising the economic aspects of work. It was also recommended to enhance teacher skills through training for both in-service and pre-service teachers, close supervision of schools, addressing issues of wastage and stagnation, and developing a health education curriculum. Furthermore, it proposed part-time education, incentivising local financial resources, and creating culturally relevant curricula for tribal communities and Ashram schools.

III. The Journey in the Late 20th Century

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have been a remarkable period characterised by dedicated endeavours to enhance accessibility and significantly elevate the quality of primary education. The collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, including the enactment of new legislation and the implementation of diverse programs, have substantially contributed to these positive developments.

Key Policy Frameworks

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 1986 emphasised universal access to and enrolment of students in primary education up to the age of 14. It also provided suitable measures for non-formal education when necessary. It continually improved the quality of instruction, eventually ensuring that all children reached the required level of learning.

A substantial programme was implemented through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), initiated in 2001–2002. This inclusive and comprehensive flagship initiative, led by the Government of India in collaboration with state and local self-governments, aimed to provide Universal Elementary Education (UEE) nationwide. The programme's objective was to ensure that every child aged 6 to 14 received meaningful and relevant elementary education by 2010. It prioritised establishing time-bound targets, with the ultimate goal of eliminating disparities based on gender and social groups within primary schools. SSA also served as a collective framework for other programmes, such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Lok Jumbish, and Operational Blackboard. The consolidation of several previously independent programmes into the SSA umbrella signified a strategic transition towards coordinating fragmented efforts into a unified, national initiative. This approach acknowledged that fragmented efforts were ineffective and underscored the necessity of a centralised, adaptable programme for the more efficient delivery of UEE across varied contexts. Such an integrated strategy facilitated improved resource allocation, consistent monitoring, and a more holistic approach to enhancing access, equity, and quality of care.

The enactment of the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009 marked a significant legislative milestone. This legislation was enacted following the amendment of Article 21-A of the Indian Constitution through the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act of 2002. Article 21-A guarantees that every child aged six to fourteen is entitled to free and compulsory education. Both the RTE Act and Article 21-A came into effect on 1 April 2010. The Act delineates free education as a system whereby no child, except those whose parents opt for a non-government-funded school, shall be required to pay any fees or expenses that could impede or discourage enrollment and completion of elementary education. The provisions of

compulsory education impose a duty upon local and state governments to ensure and uphold the enrollment and attendance of children in primary schools, as well as the successful completion of primary education within the age bracket of 6 to 14. A paradigm shift from constitutional directive principles — specifically Article 45 — to a recognised fundamental right under Article 21-A and the RTE Act 2009 signifies a profound transformation in the state's approach to educational provision. This transition elevates education from a policy aspiration to a legal entitlement that must be accessible, thereby empowering citizens and expanding the state's legal obligations. Consequently, it fosters further endeavours toward universal education and reinforces governmental accountability.

National Curriculum Framework 2005

The constitutional amendment recognised elementary school (Classes I to VIII) as the stage of compulsory education, and this was reflected in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 on Primary Education. At this stage, formal instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics begins, followed by the introduction of formal disciplines such as the sciences and social sciences. Chapter two of NCF 2005 states that this is a vital period of cognitive development during which societal, intellectual, and logical skills are shaped, along with attitudes and workforce capabilities. It highlights the importance of arts and crafts in aesthetics, work materials, and employability, as well as skills that involve experience with various kinds of work and applied skills. The framework also considers physical development essential, achieved through sports. It promotes numerous activities that foster social and emotional growth, helping children become creative, confident, sensitive, and competent individuals. Additionally, it suggests that teachers should possess a background in guidance and counselling to meet children's developmental needs and enable students from diverse social backgrounds to succeed. The framework emphasises that teaching should be process-oriented rather than result-driven, ensuring that all children are engaged in these developmental areas; the curriculum should also avoid reinforcing existing stereotypes about different groups. One element involved the gradual introduction of vocational skills to prepare children for workforce exposure. Overall, the scope of child development, as outlined by the NCF 2005, encompasses cognitive, social, emotional, physical, vocational, and aesthetic domains, thereby expanding the focus beyond traditional academic boundaries. This indicates that the success of primary education relies on the comprehensive development of the child.

The National Education Policy 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises early childhood and foundational learning. It envisions that all children will attend a "Preparatory Class or Balavatika (before Class 1) by the age of 5, where an ECCE-qualified teacher will be present. The education in these preparatory classes will primarily be play-based, focusing on the development of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills, as well as foundational skills in early literacy and numeracy. Health checkups and midday meal programmes, similar to those in the Anganwadi system, will also be available to these preparatory students. The formal introduction of ECCE through preparatory classes supports the view that intervention should

begin much earlier than Class 1, indicating a move towards a more child-centred and comprehensive educational system.

More importantly, the learning crisis in India is explicitly delineated in the publication NEP 2020. It underscores that a substantial number of elementary school pupils, estimated at over five crore, lack fundamental literacy and numeracy (FLN), which encompasses reading comprehension and performing basic arithmetic operations such as addition and subtraction. Ensuring FLN acquisition for all children is a paramount priority, with an immediate objective for each student to attain this milestone by the conclusion of the third grade. The primary aim is to achieve universal primary school literacy and numeracy by 2025. To this end, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is tasked with establishing a National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy. By 2025, it is anticipated that all state and Union Territory governments will establish phased targets through the development of immediate implementation strategies and rigorous oversight mechanisms. The plan emphasises enhancing FLN competencies within the initial and intermediate stages of the curricula, complemented by continuous formative and adaptive assessments to monitor student progress. Curricula for early childhood education and teacher training programmes will be redesigned to prioritise FLN skills. The formal acknowledgement of a learning crisis in NEP 2020, along with the disturbing statistics regarding students' deficiencies in basic literacy and numeracy, directly facilitates self-assessment and policy recalibration. It constitutes a stark recognition not only of the pervasive failure in educational achievement but also of several years of dedicated efforts aimed at achieving near-universal coverage. This underscores the necessity that, alongside improving access and infrastructure, urgent and targeted attention be directed toward enhancing the quality of learning and acquisition of fundamental skills. An ambitious target has been established for 2025 to attain universal FLN, and the establishment of a National Mission underscores the gravity and significance attributed to this issue, suggesting that the attainment of learning outcomes will serve as a reflection of the success of forthcoming policies.

IV. Persistent Challenges and Future Directions

The chronological progression of primary education in India is frequently perceived as a struggle against deeply entrenched obstacles. Nonetheless, despite notable policy advancements and augmented investment, various issues have arisen over the decades, necessitating ongoing strategic attention.

In-depth Analysis of Ongoing Obstacles

Drop-out Rates and Stagnation: A persistent issue confronting the nation is the high rate of students failing to complete their primary education. As early as 1929, the Hartog Committee Report criticised the 'terrible waste of the primary system in a secondary range of education' because only a limited number of students attained Class IV, where literacy would be achieved. The precise statistics were subsequently provided by the Education Commission (1964-66), indicating that merely 34 out of 100 students who enrolled in Class I managed to complete Class VII. The subsequent years saw a further deterioration in dropout rates, which reached 63.1% at the primary level and 77.1% at the middle level. This persistent problem

highlights the challenge of retaining students throughout the primary education cycle. It clearly demonstrates that the retention and support of students within the primary framework was a critical and systematic failure.

Resource Limitations and Funding

The enduring issue of insufficient funding has consistently impeded the universalisation of primary education. In 1937, the Congress Ministries encountered the challenge of implementing universal, free, and compulsory elementary education, albeit without adequate financial provisions. The Planning Commission identified this deficiency as a significant barrier in 1957 owing to inadequate resources. Additionally, the escalating costs of education are exerting increasing financial pressure on the system. While the government predominantly provides funding, policies have also been directed towards attracting local sources of income and community donations to augment traditional funding avenues. The primary reason for individuals' inability to afford school attendance has shifted from a lack of funds in the early 20th century to the rising costs of education in subsequent decades, reflecting an evolution in financial challenges. Initially, efforts concentrated on gathering fundamental resources to establish schools and facilitate access. As the system expanded and the pursuit of quality became paramount, maintaining educational quality proved to be a more costly endeavour per student. This delineates a shift towards financial constraints associated with academic quality.

Rapid Population Growth:

India's rapid population growth presents a considerable challenge to educational development. In 1957, the Planning Commission emphasised how this swift increase had created substantial obstacles in achieving academic objectives. Although enrollment has increased over the years, these figures have not fully kept pace with population growth, thereby complicating efforts to ensure equitable access to education for all.

Teacher Training and Development:

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping educational reforms, particularly in terms of their accessibility and quality. In 1937, the Abbot-Wood and Zakir Husain Reports emphasised the importance of implementing a three-year pre-service training program for teachers working in primary and middle schools. By 1955, the Committee on Basic Education stressed the importance of enhancing teacher training to increase its effectiveness and relevance, advocating for the adoption of holistic craft teaching and the establishment of residential training institutions. Subsequently, in 1959 and 1970, National Seminars called upon all education officials to undergo orientation training and to implement comprehensive in-service and pre-service programmes. They also emphasised the need for teachers to develop curricula that incorporate health education into their instructional strategies. These initiatives demonstrate that improving the quality of teachers has been a longstanding priority; however, numerous ongoing challenges persist in elevating overall standards and promoting wider adoption of these practices.

Curriculum Implementation and Quality

The effectiveness of curriculum delivery and the overall quality of education have frequently been subjects of ongoing concern. The Hartog Committee emphasised that standards in primary education were notably inadequate. Although it was adopted as a nationwide programme, misunderstandings persist regarding the concept of basic education. Recognising this, there is widespread agreement that an exclusive focus on quantitative growth can sometimes undermine the importance of quality. This has resulted in circumstances where children attain only a basic level of reading proficiency without progressing to a higher level. NCF 2005 was introduced to promote a process-oriented teaching methodology, thereby enhancing learner engagement. Concurrently, NEP 2020 is committed to addressing the well-documented learning crisis in fundamental literacy and numeracy, underscoring the imperative for substantial advancements to ensure children realise meaningful learning outcomes.

Other Socioeconomic Barriers:

Apart from the immediate challenges confronting education, various socioeconomic barriers have significantly contributed to impeding primary education. In 1957, the Planning Commission identified issues such as widespread poverty and illiteracy, cultural resistance to girls' education, a high number of children in impoverished areas, stagnation in neglected regions, and parental indifference as primary obstacles. The persistent problems, including high dropout rates, resource shortages, and declining quality, have been ongoing for centuries, demonstrating that these are not isolated incidents but instead deeply entrenched systemic issues linked to larger social and economic factors. These challenges are interconnected with underlying influences such as poverty, inequality, cultural norms, and administrative constraints—factors that are not readily rectified through legislation alone. They constitute a complex web that impacts both the demand for education—such as parental disengagement or children being compelled to work to support their families—and the supply side, encompassing the quality of teachers, infrastructural facilities, and curriculum design tailored to children's needs.

Strategic Imperatives for Achieving Universal and Quality Primary Education

It is vital to address these challenges with a multifaceted, ongoing approach. Future strategic imperatives will consist of

Continued focus on foundational literacy and numeracy: As NEP 2020 indicates, ensuring FLN among all children should remain a top priority, and targeted interventions and intensive monitoring will be necessary to achieve this goal.

Strengthening teacher training programs: Teacher training should be improved at both the pre-service and in-service levels. The primary aim of these trainings is to incorporate modern concepts of pedagogical methodology, develop fundamental skills, and promote the overall growth of children.

Addressing socio-economic barriers: This will include integrated developmental strategies aimed at addressing problems of poverty, fostering community participation, and providing specific support for access and retention to marginalised people.

Ensuring adequate and sustainable funding mechanisms: Moving forward, funding strategies should focus not only on increasing the amount of money available but also on maximising the use of existing resources to achieve outstanding results. It's also essential to develop sustainable funding methods, like harnessing community resources and exploring innovative ways to raise funds. This balanced approach helps create a more resilient and effective funding system.

Continuous curriculum development and assessment: The curriculum should be regularly reviewed and thoughtfully designed to remain current, of high quality, and flexible. This way, we can better meet the diverse needs of all learners and adapt to societal changes through engaging process-based learning and meaningful formative assessments.

Conclusion:

The journey of primary education in India has been remarkable, marked by steady progress and some hurdles along the way, dating back to the British era. Early British commissions laid the necessary groundwork, initially emphasising teaching in local languages. Then came Mahatma Gandhi's Basic Education movement, which was truly revolutionary—encouraging self-reliance and hands-on learning, leaving a deep mark on local educational values. After India gained independence, the goals outlined in the Constitution were ambitious and far-reaching. Still, challenges such as rapid population growth, limited resources, and high dropout rates necessitated flexible deadlines, which were often adjusted. Throughout the mid-20th century, various commissions worked diligently to address issues related to quality, teacher training, and making curricula more relevant to students. Moving into the late 20th and early 21st centuries, policy changes like NEP 1986, SSA, and the RTE Act 2009 made education a fundamental right, aiming to ensure every child gets access to elementary education. The newest initiatives, such as NEP 2020, which focus on 'preparatory classes' and a national mission on foundational literacy and numeracy, mark an exciting step forward—offering real hope to resolve the broader learning challenges we face.

Although enrollment in education has significantly increased, historical evidence reveals a familiar narrative: mere access does not inherently guarantee equitable and high-quality education for all. Persistent issues, such as high student dropout rates, insufficient resources, and occasional inadequacies in teacher training, continue to pose substantial challenges. These problems extend beyond mere infrastructural deficiencies, requiring engagement with deeper social and economic determinants that influence learning outcomes. India's journey toward expanding primary education is characterised by inspiring ambitions, innovative strategies, and continual adaptations, all while confronting substantial demographic and developmental obstacles. To facilitate an understanding of progress and ongoing challenges, Table 2 provides a comprehensive comparison of key educational objectives and persistent hurdles across different time periods. It demonstrates that some aspirations remain

unchanged, while others have evolved or persisted, underscoring the complex and continuous efforts necessary to enhance education in India.

Table 2: Evolution of Key Educational Principles and Persistent Challenges

Educational Principle/Challenge	British Era Approach/Observation	Post-Independence Approach/Observation	Contemporary Approach/Observation
Medium of Instruction	Emphasis on vernacular languages for mass instruction (Indian Education Commission, Abbot-Wood, Zakir Husain, Wardha Conference).	Continued emphasis on mother tongue as medium of instruction (Zakir Husain, Wardha Conference).	Mother tongue remains vital in early childhood; the NEP 2020 highlights the importance of multilingualism.
Pedagogical Approach	A shift towards activity-based learning, with less emphasis on book learning (Abbot-Wood, Zakir Husain, Wardha Conference).	Integration of Basic Education principles, work-oriented education, and holistic activities (Assessment Committee, National Seminar 1959, 1970).	Process-oriented instruction, play-based learning in preparatory classes, and holistic development (NCF 2005, NEP 2020).
Teacher Training	A three-year pre-service training proposal is being considered (Abbot-Wood, Zakir Husain).	Focus on improving effectiveness, relevance, holistic craft teaching, residential training, and in-service programs (Assessment Committee, National Seminar 1959, 1970).	Revised teacher training programs with a fresh focus on FLN skills (NEP 2020).
Universalization Goal	Gokhale's attempt for free and compulsory education (rejected); Sargent Plan proposed universal education for 6-14 year olds within 40 years (by 1985).	Constitutional mandate (Article 45) for 6-14 year olds by 1960 (repeatedly missed); Kher Committee proposed 6-11 by 1958, 6-14 by 1964; Education Commission proposed 5 years by 1975-76, 7	Universal enrollment and retention have reached 14 (NEP 1986), aiming for all children aged 6 to 14 to receive elementary education by 2010 (SSA). Education

		years by 1985-86.	for children 6 to 14 is a right under the RTE Act 2009.
Addressing Drop-out/Waste	The Hartog Committee noted "appalling waste" due to low retention in Class IV.	The Education Commission noted that only 34/100 students completed Class VII; drop-out rates worsened (63.1% primary, 77.1% middle).	SSA aimed to close gender and social category inequalities; the RTE Act mandates completion for 6-14-year-olds.
Quality of Education	The Hartog Committee noted "blatant inefficiency" and inadequate standards, where children "just learn enough to get by."	Quantitative expansion eroded quality; inadequate standards (Education Commission).	Focus on "rising calibre of instruction" (NEP 1986); SSA aimed to improve quality; NCF 2005 emphasised holistic development; NEP 2020 addresses "learning crisis" and prioritises FLN.
Funding/Resources	Challenge of implementing universal education without appropriate funding (Congress Ministries); Gandhi's self-sustaining craft model.	Lack of sufficient resources, increasing cost of schooling, efforts to utilise community donations and incentivise local resources.	SSA required careful planning and evaluation due to costs; the RTE Act defines "free education" to remove financial barriers.
Population Growth	Implicit challenge in large-scale universalisation plans (Sargent Plan's 40-year timeline).	Rapid population growth is identified as a significant obstacle, as enrollment is not keeping pace with the growing population.	Continued demographic pressure, though policies like SSA and RTE aim for universal access despite this.
Early Childhood	Although not a primary focus, the Abbot-Wood	The 1970 National Seminar emphasised	Formal integration of "Preparatory

Education	and Zakir Husain reports laid the groundwork for child-centred learning.	tying preschool curricula to the family/neighbourhood, involving voluntary organisations.	Class" (Balavatika) for under 5s with ECCE-qualified teachers, play-based learning, and extension of mid-day meals/health check-ups (NEP 2020).
Foundational Literacy & Numeracy (FLN)	Implicit goal of reaching literacy by Class IV (Hartog Committee).	Implicit in quality concerns, but not explicitly defined as a crisis.	Identified expressly as a "learning crisis" with over five crore students lacking FLN; top priority with National Mission and 2025 target (NEP 2020).

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