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International Day of Education 2026 — NEP 2020, Learning Outcomes, and the AI Challenge

24 January 2026

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International Day of Education 2026 — NEP 2020, Learning Outcomes, and the AI Challenge

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WHY IN NEWS

The UN International Day of Education (January 24) was observed with the 2026 theme “AI in Education: Preserving Human Agency.” In India, the occasion brought focus to the implementation of NEP 2020 — particularly the NIPUN Bharat mission targeting foundational literacy by 2026-27 — and the persistent learning outcome gaps documented in recent ASER reports.

WHY EDUCATION NEEDS A DAY

The United Nations established the **International Day of Education** on January 24 in **2018** (UN General Assembly resolution 72/222) to affirm education as a universal human right and a foundation for sustainable development. The day coincides with UNESCO’s global role as the lead agency for SDG 4 (Quality Education).

2026 Theme: “AI in Education: Preserving Human Agency”

The 2026 theme reflects the rapidly accelerating integration of **Artificial Intelligence** into educational settings — from AI tutors and personalised learning platforms to automated grading and AI-generated content. The question the theme poses: as technology becomes more capable, how do we ensure education continues to develop **critical thinking, creativity, ethical reasoning, and interpersonal skills** — the distinctly human capacities that AI cannot replace?

For India, the theme resonates with the NEP 2020’s emphasis on moving away from rote learning toward conceptual understanding — a shift that requires teachers, not just technology.

NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020 — THE COMPREHENSIVE OVERHAUL

Origins

India’s education policy framework had not been comprehensively reviewed since the **National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986** (revised 1992). The **NEP 2020**, approved by the Union Cabinet on **July 29, 2020**, was drafted by a committee chaired by former ISRO chairman **Dr. K. Kasturirangan**.

5+3+3+4 Structural Change

The most visible change in NEP 2020 is the replacement of the **10+2** structure with a **5+3+3+4 structure** — aligning with the developmental stages of children:

Stage	Age	Classes	Focus
Foundational	3–8 years	Pre-primary + 1–2	Play-based, activity-based learning
Preparatory	8–11 years	3–5	Discovery, hands-on, textbook learning
Middle	11–14 years	6–8	Experiential learning, subject teachers
Secondary	14–18 years	9–12	Critical thinking, deep learning, flexibility

Key Pillars of NEP 2020

1. Mother Tongue Instruction (MTI): NEP mandates teaching in the **home language/mother tongue** up to at least **Grade 5**, preferably Grade 8. This is based on cognitive research showing children learn foundational concepts more effectively in a familiar language. Implementation across states is at varying stages.

2. NIPUN Bharat — Foundational Learning: The **National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat)** was launched on **July 5, 2021**, under the Ministry of Education.

Target: Every child by the end of **Grade 3** (by 2026–27) should be able to read with comprehension and perform basic arithmetic

Focus: Classes 1–3 (ages 6–9)

Implementation tools: Structured pedagogy, teacher training, assessment frameworks, and reading materials in multiple languages

Monitoring: State/UT-level NIPUN targets set; progress tracked through standardised assessments

3. Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) — Higher Education Flexibility: The **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** is a national digital infrastructure (launched 2021) that allows higher education students to:

Take courses from multiple universities and accumulate credits

Exit a degree programme after Year 1 (certificate), Year 2 (diploma), or complete the full degree

Return to complete the degree at a later stage (multiple entry/exit)

Transfer credits between institutions

This makes higher education more flexible and accommodating of the diverse socioeconomic realities of Indian students who may need to pause and resume education.

4. PM SHRI Schools: The government identified **14,500+ PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI)** — model schools selected across states and UTs to serve as exemplars of NEP implementation, featuring:

- Updated pedagogy
- Improved infrastructure (labs, libraries, digital tools)
- Focus on discovery-based and activity-based learning
- Strong pre-primary (Foundational Stage) integration

5. PARAKH — New Assessment Authority: PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) was established as a national assessment body under NEP 2020, replacing the older assessment frameworks. PARAKH:

- Conducts large-scale National Achievement Surveys (NAS)
- Provides assessment guidelines to states
- Promotes holistic report cards (beyond marks — including co-curricular achievements)
- Benchmarks Indian student learning against international standards (PISA)

6. National Credit Framework (NCrF): The NCrF integrates academic, vocational, and experiential learning pathways under a single credit system, allowing mobility between vocational and academic education.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023

Under NEP 2020, a new **National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023** was released — the first revision of the national curriculum framework since NCF 2005. It provides detailed guidance on:

- What children should learn at each stage
- How it should be taught (pedagogical approaches)
- The role of local contexts, languages, and cultures
- Assessment approaches that reduce rote learning

ASER — THE LEARNING OUTCOMES REALITY CHECK

The **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)** is published annually by **Pratham**, India's largest education NGO. ASER conducts household surveys of children aged 3–16 in rural India, assessing:

- Reading ability:** Can the child read a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a Grade 2 text, or a Grade 5 text?
- Arithmetic ability:** Can the child recognize numbers, do subtraction, or do division?

Key findings from recent ASER reports:

The core finding that ASER has consistently documented: **a large proportion of Indian children in upper-primary classes cannot perform basic reading or arithmetic tasks expected of Grade 2 students**. This means the education system was providing attendance and certification without corresponding learning.

Post-COVID recovery: While school attendance has largely recovered from pandemic disruption, learning levels — particularly foundational reading and arithmetic — have not fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels, especially in rural government schools.

State variation: Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu consistently perform better on ASER learning outcomes. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh have historically weaker outcomes though recent improvements are noted.

Private vs Government: ASER data has consistently shown a gap between government and private school learning outcomes, though recent data shows this gap is narrowing in some states.

AI IN EDUCATION — INDIA'S APPROACH

India's NEP 2020 pre-empted the AI revolution by emphasising **critical thinking, creativity, and conceptual understanding** over rote memorisation. The **National e-Education Architecture (NEAT)** and the **PM e-VIDYA** platform provide digital learning resources.

More recently:

The **IndiaAI Mission (2024)** aims to deploy AI in education for personalised learning

DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) — the national platform for teacher training and digital content

Aarogya Setu, SWAYAM, NPTEL — complementary digital learning infrastructure

The challenge: AI can personalise content and track progress, but it cannot replace the mentorship, social learning, and emotional development that human teachers provide — especially for foundational learning ages (3–8 years) where human relationships are critical to cognitive development.

UPSC RELEVANCE

*International Day of Education: January 24 (UNGA resolution 72/222, 2018); 2026 theme: “AI in Education: Preserving Human Agency”; NEP 2020: approved July 29, 2020 (K. Kasturirangan committee); 5+3+3+4 structure; NIPUN Bharat: launched July 5, 2021; ABC (Academic Bank of Credits) 2021; PM SHRI: 14,500+ schools; PARAKH: new assessment body; NCF-SE 2023; ASER by Pratham; SDG 4. Education policy – NEP 2020 and its implementation challenges; learning outcome crisis in India; mother tongue instruction; role of private sector in education; RTE Act provisions. **GS-3:** Technology in education – AI, digital divide, EdTech regulation; DIKSHA, SWAYAM platforms.*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF EDUCATION:

Date: **January 24** annually

Established: **2018** (UNGA resolution 72/222)

2026 Theme: “AI in Education: Preserving Human Agency”

UN lead agency for SDG 4: **UNESCO**

SDG 4: Quality Education — “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”

NEP 2020 — KEY DATA:

Approved: **July 29, 2020** (Union Cabinet)

Committee: **K. Kasturirangan** (former ISRO chairman)

Previous policy: **NPE 1986** (revised 1992)

Structure: **5+3+3+4** replacing 10+2

Target: **6% of GDP** on education (NEP goal; India currently spends ~4.6%)

NIPUN BHARAT:

Launched: **July 5, 2021**

Ministry: **Education**

Full form: National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy

Target: Grade 3 foundational literacy by **2026–27**

Covers: **Classes 1–3** (ages 6–9)

ACADEMIC BANK OF CREDITS (ABC):

Launched: **2021**

Purpose: Multiple entry/exit, credit transfer across higher education institutions

Exit options: Certificate (Year 1), Diploma (Year 2), Degree (Year 3/4)

PM SHRI SCHOOLS:

Full form: PM Schools for Rising India

Number: **14,500+** selected schools

Purpose: Model NEP-implementation schools

PARAKH:

Full form: Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development

Role: National assessment authority; NAS surveys; holistic report cards

ASER:

By: **Pratham** (India’s largest education NGO)

Type: Household survey of rural children aged 3–16

Measures: Reading level + arithmetic level

Published: Annually (since 2005)

Key finding: Large gap between school enrolment and learning outcomes

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

RTE Act 2009: Free and compulsory education for ages 6–14; 25% EWS reservation in private schools

DIKSHA: Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing — national platform for teacher training and digital content

SWAYAM: MOOCs platform for higher education

NPTEL: National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (IITs + IISc)

National Credit Framework (NCrF): Integrates academic + vocational + experiential learning

NCF-SE 2023: National Curriculum Framework for School Education (first revision since NCF 2005)

Sources: UNESCO, PIB, ASER Centre, Ministry of Education

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