

Breaking the Rote Cycle: New Pathways for Assessment of Learning envisioned under NEP 2020

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Abstract

This chapter explores the evolution of assessment practices in Indian education and the urgent need to move beyond rote learning. Beginning with the oral, debate-centered gurukul traditions of ancient India, it traces the colonial transformation of education into a rigid examination system focused on memorization. The post-independence period introduced reform attempts, such as the Kothari Commission and Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), but rote practices continued to dominate classrooms. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a transformative vision by emphasizing competency-based evaluation, holistic progress cards, and technology-driven assessments. However, the success of these reforms depends on teacher readiness, curriculum restructuring, and societal acceptance of new forms of assessment. The chapter argues that breaking the rote cycle is both an educational and social necessity, essential for building a knowledge-driven India that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and innovation.

Keywords: *Indian education, rote learning, assessment reforms, NEP 2020, gurukul system, colonial education, Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), holistic assessment, competency-based learning, educational transformation*

Introduction

Education in India has always been more than the transmission of knowledge, it has been a force shaping culture, social mobility, and national identity. However, the way learning is assessed has played a defining role in how education is perceived and practiced. For centuries, “rote memorization” which is the ability to reproduce information verbatim that has been the most common measure of student performance. While this approach ensured a uniform standard, it often came at the cost of “critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills”.

In the contemporary era, where India seeks to position itself as a knowledge-driven society, the question of “how students should be assessed” has become increasingly significant. This chapter provides a “historical overview of Indian education”, highlighting how assessment

practices have evolved from ancient traditions to colonial policies, through post-independence reforms, and finally to the “*National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*”. It argues that breaking the cycle of rote learning requires “*systemic transformation in assessment practices*” to promote deeper understanding, creativity, and lifelong learning.

Ancient Indian Education: Learning Through Dialogue and Practice

The origins of the Indian education system go back thousands of years, with the “gurukul system” serving as the most recognized model. Students lived with their teacher (guru) and received holistic instruction covering philosophy, logic, grammar, mathematics, medicine, and the arts. Importantly, there were no written examinations. Instead, learning was evaluated through oral recitation, philosophical debate, and demonstration of practical skills (Altekar, 1934/2009). Institutions like ‘*Takshashila*’ and ‘*Nalanda*’ (4th century BCE–12th century CE) attracted scholars from across Asia and fostered an intellectual environment based on ‘critical inquiry’. Assessment focused on the ability of learner to engage in discussions, apply knowledge, and contribute to intellectual life (Sen, 1994). Thus, in its earliest forms, Indian education ‘did not prioritize rote learning’. Instead, it encouraged reflection, memory combined with understanding, and integration of knowledge into everyday practice.

Colonial India: The Institutionalization of Rote Examinations

The arrival of the British in the 18th and 19th centuries drastically changed the purpose of education in India. The “*Macaulay Minute of 1835*” advocated English education with the explicit aim of creating a class of Indians who would be “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste” (Macaulay, 1835/1956). This led to a system designed primarily to train clerks and administrators. Examinations were formalized, and success depended on memorizing texts prescribed by colonial authorities. The ‘Indian Civil Services Examination’ became the ultimate model, reinforcing the culture of rote memorization and competition (Kumar, 2005). This marked the beginning of ‘exam-centric education’, where marks and certificates determined future opportunities rather than creativity or innovation. The colonial model left behind a lasting legacy: learning equated with passing exams. Even today, Indian society associates success with marks, board exam scores, and rankings in entrance tests (Chopra, 2019).

Post-Independence Reforms: Struggles for Change

After 1947, independent India aimed to use education as a tool for democracy, modernization, and social justice. The “Kothari Commission (1964–66)” emphasized the need for reforms in

evaluation, recommending internal assessments and comprehensive approaches instead of rote-based final exams (Kothari Commission, 1966). Despite these recommendations, the exam system remained dominant. ‘Board examinations’ at the end of Class 10 and Class 12 became high-stakes gateways for higher education, and competitive entrance exams such as the IIT-JEE or NEET reinforced rote learning (Bhatia, 2002). Attempts to reform evaluation such as the introduction of ‘Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE)’ in 2009 were meant to reduce stress and shift focus to skills and creativity. However, the lack of adequate teacher training and the societal obsession with marks undermined its impact (NCERT, 2012; Rampal, 2014). Thus, while reforms were envisioned, the culture of rote learning remained deeply entrenched in practice.

NEP 2020: A New Vision for Assessment

The “National Education Policy (NEP) 2020” represents a paradigm shift in approach of India to assessment. It identifies rote learning as one of the central weaknesses of the system and calls for transformative reforms.

Key proposals include:

Assessment for learning, not of learning: Moving from memorization-based exams to formative assessments that support student growth.

Competency-based questions: Focus on applying knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Government of India, 2020).

Holistic Progress Cards: Replacing traditional report cards with multidimensional progress reports covering cognitive, socio-emotional, and skill development (Menon, 2021).

Technology-enabled assessments: Use of AI and digital platforms for adaptive testing and feedback.

National Assessment Centre (PARAKH): Established to standardize evaluation and reduce disparities across states and boards. The policy signals a deliberate effort to break the rote cycle and encourage “deeper learning, creativity, and flexibility” in evaluation.

Breaking the Rote Cycle: Challenges and Opportunities

While NEP 2020 provides a framework, the challenge lies in implementation. Breaking the rote cycle requires more than policy, it requires changing the culture of education.

- 1. Teacher Empowerment:** Teachers must be trained to design meaningful assessments. Without capacity building, reforms will remain theoretical (Singh & Agrawal, 2020).
- 2. Curriculum Redesign:** Content-heavy syllabi must be restructured to allow space for inquiry, project-based learning, and creativity.
- 3. Parental and Societal Mindset:** Parents often equate marks with success. Awareness campaigns and gradual exposure to holistic assessment can shift this mindset (Chopra, 2019).
- 4. Technology Integration:** Digital tools can provide innovative, personalized assessment models, but issues of access and equity must be addressed (Kumar & Singh, 2022).
- 5. Policy Consistency:** Past reforms like CCE failed partly due to poor implementation. Sustained commitment and monitoring are essential.

These challenges show that while the policy framework exists, India must address cultural and systemic barriers to create a truly learner-centered assessment system.

Conclusion

The journey of assessment in India reflects the broader history of Indian education. From ‘dialogue-based learning in ancient times’ to ‘rote-based colonial exams’, from ‘post-independence reforms’ to the ‘transformative vision of NEP 2020’, the trajectory has been one of tension between tradition and reform. Breaking the rote cycle is not just an educational necessity but also a social and economic imperative. In a rapidly changing world, India cannot rely on a system that rewards memory over creativity. Instead, it must build an education system that fosters innovation, empathy, critical thinking, and adaptability. The NEP 2020 provides a roadmap, but its success depends on the collective will of policymakers, educators, parents, and students. Only then can India move beyond rote learning to a system of assessment that truly reflects the richness of human potential.

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