

Soft Skills In Education Policy: From Colonial Roots To Global Frameworks

¹Ms. Divya Jain, ²Dr. Devendra Singh Sindhu

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor

¹Department of Education,

¹Ch. Shivnath Singh Shandilya P.G. College, Machhra, Meerut, India

¹dj.lifelong89@gmail.com, ²drdssindhu@gmail.com

Abstract—This article examines the evolution, role, and importance of soft skills in education in light of the national & international policy frameworks. This study highlights how various soft skills like communication, collaboration, adaptability, and socio-emotional competencies, etc., have transitioned from marginal concerns to central objectives in the modern education system & how its roots draw heavily on historical commissions, national education policies, and global initiatives. In the history of Indian education during the colonial era, policies prioritized rote learning and clerical training, whereas reformist thinkers advocated for holistic development, prioritizing values and creativity. Personality development, critical thinking, and social cohesion is emphasized by the post-independence commissions, paving a way to socio-emotional learning and holistic development emphasized in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. National initiatives such as Skill India advocated for bridging the gap between industry demands and skill requirements. Internationally, frameworks by UNESCO, OECD, the European Union, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) policies in the United States advocated on the identification of soft skills as crucial for 21st-century education, global citizenship, and sustainable development. This article incorporates a policy analysis approach to unfold India's performance and discrepancy within comparative global trends. The findings highlight that with effective integration of soft skills into teacher education and curricula, full human potential could be achieved, leading to scientific advancement, national integration, and cultural preservation.

Keywords—Soft Skills; Education Policy; Sustainable Development; NEP 2020; Global Citizenship

I. INTRODUCTION

Soft Skills and Their Relevance

Soft skills refer to a set of character's traits which include communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, empathy, socio-emotional intelligence and many more [10]. These interpersonal and cognitive abilities are complementary to the technical (hard) skills to create a more effective result. They enable individuals to interact effectively and adapt quickly to changing environments, thereby contributing meaningfully to society and the nation [6]. In contemporary education, soft skills are highly recognized as they enable learners not only for employment but also for a balanced life by inculcating leadership, innovation, and responsible citizenship in a globalized world [5].

Research Problem

Despite the varied literature that advocates for the importance of soft skills, an enduring gap exists between the attainment of technical skills and the development of interpersonal proficiency. In traditional education systems, an undivided emphasis was laid on rote learning, examinations, and subject-centred teaching, which has resulted in a large number of graduates who are academically qualified but lack the basic soft skills required for living a happy, healthy, and peaceful life. Bridging this gap remains a critical challenge for education policy and practice.

Objectives

This article aims to explore the evolution of soft skills in the context of national and international education policy to: Identify the role of soft skills in pre-independence education policies in India that are mainly shaped by the East India Company & British Parliament.

Analyze post-independence commissions and national education policies in India that progressively emphasized the thoughts of Indian education reformists, incorporating essential soft skills such as personality development, critical thinking, and socio-emotional learning.

Examine national initiatives like Skill India and national education policies such as NEP 2020, which specifically integrate soft skills into curricula.

Identify the competence of Indian policies in contrast to international frameworks, which completely concentrate on the recognition of soft skills as vital for 21st-century education.

Significance

This study identifies the importance of incorporating soft skills into curricula and teacher education by using comparative policy analysis, which contributes to both academic discourses and practical policymaking. The findings are relevant to various

stakeholders of education like educators, teachers, researchers and policymakers, who are responsible for aligning education with the dynamic environment. Ultimately, the article recommends that soft skills are not optional but central to the mission of education providing holistic development to learners by preparing them as adaptable professionals, empathetic citizens, and lifelong learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Foundations of Soft Skills

Soft skills, often referred to as "people skills" or "life skills," encompass communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and socio-emotional intelligence [10][11]. Scholars argue that these competencies are as critical as technical knowledge for success in personal, academic, and professional domains [12]. A systematic review of interventions across school and university curricula highlights that soft skills are increasingly promoted worldwide, yet comprehensive integration remains uneven [6][7].

Indian Perspectives on Soft Skills

Research in India underscores the growing necessity of embedding soft skills into educational frameworks [2][9]. Studies highlight the gap between traditional exam-centric curricula and the interpersonal competencies demanded by modern workplaces [11][12]. Scholars emphasize that soft skills enhance employability, foster entrepreneurship, and contribute to holistic personal development [1]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is frequently cited as a turning point, explicitly calling for multidisciplinary approaches and socio-emotional learning as integral to holistic education [2]. However, challenges remain in teacher preparedness, assessment models, and systemic implementation [16][13].

International Perspectives

Globally, policy briefs and comparative studies emphasize the centrality of soft skills in 21st-century education. UNESCO and OECD frameworks advocate for embedding socio-emotional learning, critical thinking, and collaboration into curricula as essential for sustainable development and global citizenship [7]. The European Union's *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* framework positions personal and social skills as vital for employability and civic engagement [5]. In the United States, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives integrate empathy, resilience, and teamwork into school systems [3], reflecting a holistic vision of education.

Emerging Trends in Soft Skills

Recent literature also explores innovative pedagogies for soft skills development. For instance, studies show that literature and experiential learning can significantly enhance communication and emotional intelligence among students. International policy briefs highlight the need for measurable indicators of soft skills, urging education systems to move beyond academic scores toward holistic assessment [6][7].

Synthesis

The literature reveals a clear trajectory: soft skills have shifted from being peripheral to becoming central in both national and international education policies. While India's NEP 2020 aligns with global frameworks, the challenge lies in operationalizing these policies through curriculum design, teacher education, and assessment innovation. Comparative scholarship suggests that successful integration requires systemic commitment, measurable outcomes, and pedagogical creativity [9][1].

III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

Colonial Education Policies

Education during the colonial period was primarily designed to serve the administrative and clerical needs of the British Empire [20][19]. Policies such as Wood's Despatch (1854) and the Hunter Commission (1882) emphasized literacy, rote learning, and the production of a workforce capable of supporting colonial governance. The focus was on technical and clerical proficiency, with little attention given to interpersonal or socio-emotional development. Soft skills, as understood today, were largely absent from the formal curriculum, as the system prioritized conformity, obedience, and examination performance over creativity or collaboration.

Indigenous Educational Traditions

In contrast, indigenous systems such as the Gurukul and Madrasa traditions placed greater emphasis on holistic development [16]. These models fostered discipline, moral values, oral communication, and community living—early manifestations of soft skills. Learners were trained not only in academic knowledge but also in interpersonal conduct, respect for elders, and adaptability within social contexts.

Reformist Thinkers and Alternative Visions

Prominent Indian reformers and educators challenged the colonial model and advocated for education that nurtured character, creativity, and community life:

Mahatma Gandhi's Nai Talim emphasized experiential learning, self-reliance, and moral development, aligning closely with modern concepts of soft skills such as adaptability and problem-solving.

Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati model promoted creativity, artistic expression, and intercultural dialogue, highlighting communication and collaboration as central to education.

Swami Vivekananda stressed character-building, leadership, and values as integral to education, anticipating the importance of socio-emotional competencies.

Synthesis

Pre-independence education in India thus reflected a dual trajectory: colonial policies that sidelined soft skills in favour of rote learning, and reformist visions that foregrounded holistic development and values. While the colonial system left a legacy of exam-centric education, reformist thought laid the foundation for later policy emphasis on personality development, critical thinking, and socio-emotional learning.

IV. POST-INDEPENDENCE POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN INDIA

Radhakrishnan Commission (1948–49)

Focused on higher education, emphasizing personality development, critical thinking, and moral values [18]. It recognized that education should cultivate not only intellectual capacity but also character and leadership—early acknowledgment of soft skills.

Secondary Education Commission (1952–53)

Highlighted the need for balanced development, including citizenship training and social responsibility [17], which align with interpersonal and socio-emotional competencies.

Kothari Commission (1964–66)

The Kothari Commission marked a turning point by advocating for education as a means of social transformation [16]. It emphasized:

Social cohesion and national integration.

Adaptability and problem-solving skills to meet the challenges of modernization.

Value-based education, which indirectly nurtures empathy, communication, and collaboration.

National Education Policies (1968, 1986, 1992)

NEP 1968: Stressed national unity and the development of responsible citizens, linking education with values and social skills [15].

NEP 1986 (modified in 1992): Introduced vocational relevance and life skills, recognizing the importance of preparing learners for both employment and social participation [14][13].

These policies gradually expanded the scope of education beyond academics, embedding soft skills into the broader vision of holistic development.

Contemporary Policy: NEP 2020

The National Education Policy 2020 represents the most explicit integration of soft skills into India's education framework [2]. Key highlights include:

Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education: Encourages critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills.

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL): Recognized as central to student well-being and lifelong learning [3].

Experiential and Project-Based Learning: Designed to foster collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving.

Employability and Global Readiness: Aligns education with workplace demands, bridging the gap between technical knowledge and interpersonal competence [1].

National Initiatives

Skill India Mission (2015) and the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) emphasize workplace readiness, teamwork, and communication skills [9].

Reports such as the *India Skills Report* consistently highlight the employability gap [1], underscoring the need for stronger integration of soft skills into curricula.

Synthesis

Post-independence education policy in India reflects a gradual but steady recognition of soft skills as essential to holistic development. From early commissions that emphasized character and citizenship to NEP 2020's explicit focus on socio-emotional learning, the trajectory demonstrates a shift from peripheral acknowledgment to central policy priority. National initiatives further reinforce the importance of bridging technical expertise with interpersonal competence, positioning soft skills as indispensable for both personal growth and national progress.

V. INTERNATIONAL POLICY PERSPECTIVES

UNESCO and OECD Frameworks

Global organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD have consistently emphasized the importance of “21st-century skills,” which include critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and socio-emotional learning [7][6]. These frameworks argue that education must prepare learners not only for employment but also for sustainable development and global citizenship. Soft skills are positioned as essential for navigating uncertainty, fostering intercultural understanding, and contributing to inclusive societies.

European Union (EU) Policies

The European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning framework explicitly identifies personal, social, and learning-to-learn skills as core competencies [5]. EU education policies encourage embedding soft skills into curricula to enhance employability, adaptability, and civic engagement. The emphasis is on lifelong learning, ensuring that individuals continuously develop interpersonal and problem-solving abilities throughout their educational and professional journeys.

United States: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

In the United States, while the Common Core Standards focus primarily on academic achievement, many states have adopted Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks [3]. SEL policies integrate empathy, resilience, teamwork, and emotional regulation into school curricula. These initiatives highlight the role of soft skills in fostering holistic development, reducing behavioural issues, and preparing students for collaborative workplaces.

Asia-Pacific Initiatives

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including Singapore, Japan, and Australia, emphasize soft skills as part of workforce readiness and innovation strategies [8][4]. Policies encourage communication, adaptability, and creativity to meet the demands of rapidly evolving economies. Experiential learning, project-based education, and digital pedagogy are often used to cultivate these competencies.

Comparative Insights

India’s NEP 2020 aligns closely with these international frameworks by explicitly integrating socio-emotional learning, holistic development, and employability into its vision. However, while global policies often provide robust assessment models and teacher education frameworks, India faces challenges in implementation [1], particularly in shifting from exam-centric practices to experiential and competency-based learning.

Comparative Policy Analysis

Education policies across India and the world converge on the recognition that soft skills are indispensable for preparing learners to thrive in dynamic, interconnected societies. However, the emphasis, implementation strategies, and assessment mechanisms vary across contexts.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis India vs. International Frameworks

Context	Policy Frameworks	Emphasis on Soft Skills	Key Strategies	Implementation Challenges
India (Pre-Independence)	Colonial policies (Wood’s Despatch, Hunter Commission); Reformist visions (Gandhi’s Nai Talim, Tagore’s Visva-Bharati)	Colonial: minimal focus; Reformists: values, creativity, community life	Indigenous traditions emphasized moral values, oral communication, experiential learning	Colonial dominance sidelined holistic approaches
India (Post-Independence)	Radhakrishnan Commission (1948), Kothari Commission (1964–66), NEPs (1968, 1986, 1992)	Gradual recognition of personality development, citizenship, adaptability	Value-based education, vocational relevance, life skills	Exam-centric culture, limited teacher education
India	NEP 2020, Skill	Explicit integration	Multidisciplinary	Implementation

<i>(Contemporary)</i>	India Mission, NSDC	of socio-emotional learning, holistic development, employability	curricula, project-based learning, workplace readiness	gaps in teacher preparedness, assessment rubrics
<i>UNESCO & OECD</i>	Global 21st-century skills frameworks	Critical thinking, collaboration, socio-emotional learning	Policy briefs, curriculum design, measurable indicators	Translating global frameworks into local contexts
<i>European Union</i>	Key Competences for Lifelong Learning	Personal, social, and learning-to-learn skills	Lifelong learning pathways, civic engagement	Ensuring equity across diverse member states
<i>United States</i>	Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) policies	Empathy, resilience, teamwork, emotional regulation	Integration into school curricula, teacher education	Variability across states, balancing SEL with academic standards
<i>Asia-Pacific</i>	Workforce readiness initiatives (Singapore, Japan, Australia)	Communication, adaptability, creativity	Experiential learning, digital pedagogy, innovation focus	Rapidly evolving economies demand constant adaptation

Synthesis

Convergence: Across contexts, soft skills are recognized as central to employability, holistic development, and global citizenship.

Divergence: India's policies emphasize socio-emotional learning and employability but face challenges in implementation, while international frameworks often provide stronger assessment models and systemic teacher education.

Implication: India's NEP 2020 aligns with global trends but requires robust mechanisms to operationalize soft skills integration at scale [2].

VI. DISCUSSION

Convergences Across Policies

A clear convergence emerges across Indian and international education policies: soft skills are no longer viewed as peripheral but as core competencies essential for holistic development, employability, and global citizenship [2][6][7]. Whether through India's NEP 2020 or UNESCO's 21st-century skills framework, policies consistently emphasize communication, collaboration, adaptability, and socio-emotional learning as indispensable for preparing learners to thrive in dynamic societies.

Divergences in Emphasis and Implementation

Despite this shared vision, divergences remain in emphasis and implementation:

India's Context: Policies such as NEP 2020 [2] and Skill India [9] explicitly highlight socio-emotional learning and employability. However, systemic challenges exam-centric culture, limited teacher education, and underdeveloped assessment frameworks hinder effective integration [1][16].

International Contexts: Frameworks in the EU [5], US [3], and OECD [6] often provide robust assessment models and teacher education systems, ensuring that soft skills are not only policy priorities but also measurable outcomes. India's policies, while ambitious, still require stronger operational mechanisms.

Policy-Practice Gap

The discussion highlights a persistent policy-practice gap in India. While commissions and policies articulate the importance of soft skills, classroom realities often remain dominated by rote learning and exam preparation [15][14]. Teachers may lack the training or resources to foster socio-emotional competencies, and assessment systems rarely capture interpersonal or creative abilities. Bridging this gap requires systemic reforms that move beyond policy rhetoric to practical implementation [11][12].

Recommendations

Curriculum Integration: Embed soft skills across subjects rather than treating them as add-ons. Project-based learning, group work, and experiential activities should be mainstreamed.

Teacher education: Equip educators with pedagogical tools to foster communication, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. Continuous professional development programs are essential.

Assessment Innovation: Develop rubrics and experiential evaluation methods that measure soft skills alongside academic achievement. Portfolios, peer reviews, and reflective journals can serve as effective tools.

Technology and Digital Pedagogy: Leverage digital platforms, simulations, and collaborative tools to cultivate adaptability and teamwork in virtual and blended learning environments.

Policy Alignment with Industry Needs: Strengthen collaboration between education institutions and industry to ensure that soft skills training aligns with workplace expectations.

Implications for India

India's NEP 2020 positions the country well within global trends, but successful implementation will determine its impact. By learning from international frameworks that emphasize measurable outcomes and systemic teacher support, India can bridge its employability gap and prepare learners for both national development and global participation.

VII. CONCLUSION

The evolution of education policy demonstrates a clear trajectory: soft skills have moved from being peripheral considerations to becoming central objectives of modern education. In pre-independence India, colonial policies prioritized rote learning and clerical training, sidelining interpersonal and socio-emotional development. Reformist thinkers, however, laid the groundwork for holistic education by emphasizing values, creativity, and community life. Post-independence commissions and policies progressively recognized the importance of personality development, critical thinking, and social cohesion, culminating in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which explicitly integrates socio-emotional learning and holistic development.

National initiatives such as Skill India further underscore the employability gap between technical knowledge and interpersonal competence, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reforms. Internationally, frameworks by UNESCO, OECD, the European Union, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) policies in the United States converge on the recognition of soft skills as indispensable for 21st-century education, global citizenship, and sustainable development.

The comparative analysis reveals both convergence and divergence: while India's NEP 2020 aligns with global trends, challenges remain in implementation, particularly in curriculum integration, teacher education, and assessment innovation. Bridging this policy-practice gap is critical to ensuring that learners are not only academically proficient but also adaptable, empathetic, and collaborative citizens.

Ultimately, the findings argue that effective integration of soft skills into education systems is not optional but essential. For India and the global community alike, embedding communication, collaboration, adaptability, and socio-emotional learning into curricula and pedagogy is vital for preparing learners to thrive in dynamic, interconnected societies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Wheebox, CII, & UNDP. (2025). *India Skills Report 2025*. New Delhi: Wheebox.
- [2] Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education.
- [3] Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020). *SEL Framework*. Chicago: CASEL.
- [4] Australian Government, Department of Education. (2019). *General Capabilities in the Australian Curriculum*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- [5] European Commission. (2018). *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. Brussels: European Union.
- [6] OECD. (2018). *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- [7] UNESCO. (2015). *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action*. Paris: UNESCO.
- [8] Singapore Ministry of Education. (2015). *21st Century Competencies Framework*. Singapore: MOE.
- [9] National Skill Development Corporation. (2015). *Skill India Mission*. New Delhi: NSDC.
- [10] Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453–465.
- [11] Heckman, J. J., & Kautz, T. (2012). Hard evidence on soft skills. *Labour Economics*, 19(4), 451–464.
- [12] Andrews, J., & Higson, H. (2008). Graduate employability, 'soft skills' versus 'hard' business knowledge: A European study. *Higher Education in Europe*, 33(4), 411–422.
- [13] Government of India. (1992). *Programme of Action: National Policy on Education 1986 (Revised)*. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development.
- [14] Government of India. (1986). *National Policy on Education*. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development.
- [15] Government of India. (1968). *National Policy on Education*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education.
- [16] Government of India. (1966). *Report of the Education Commission (Kothari Commission)*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education.

- [17] Government of India. (1953). *Report of the Secondary Education Commission*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education.
- [18] Government of India. (1949). *Report of the University Education Commission (Radhakrishnan Commission)*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education.
- [19] Government of India. (1882). *Report of the Hunter Commission*. Calcutta: Government Press.
- [20] Government of India. (1854). *Wood's Despatch*. Calcutta: Government Press.

