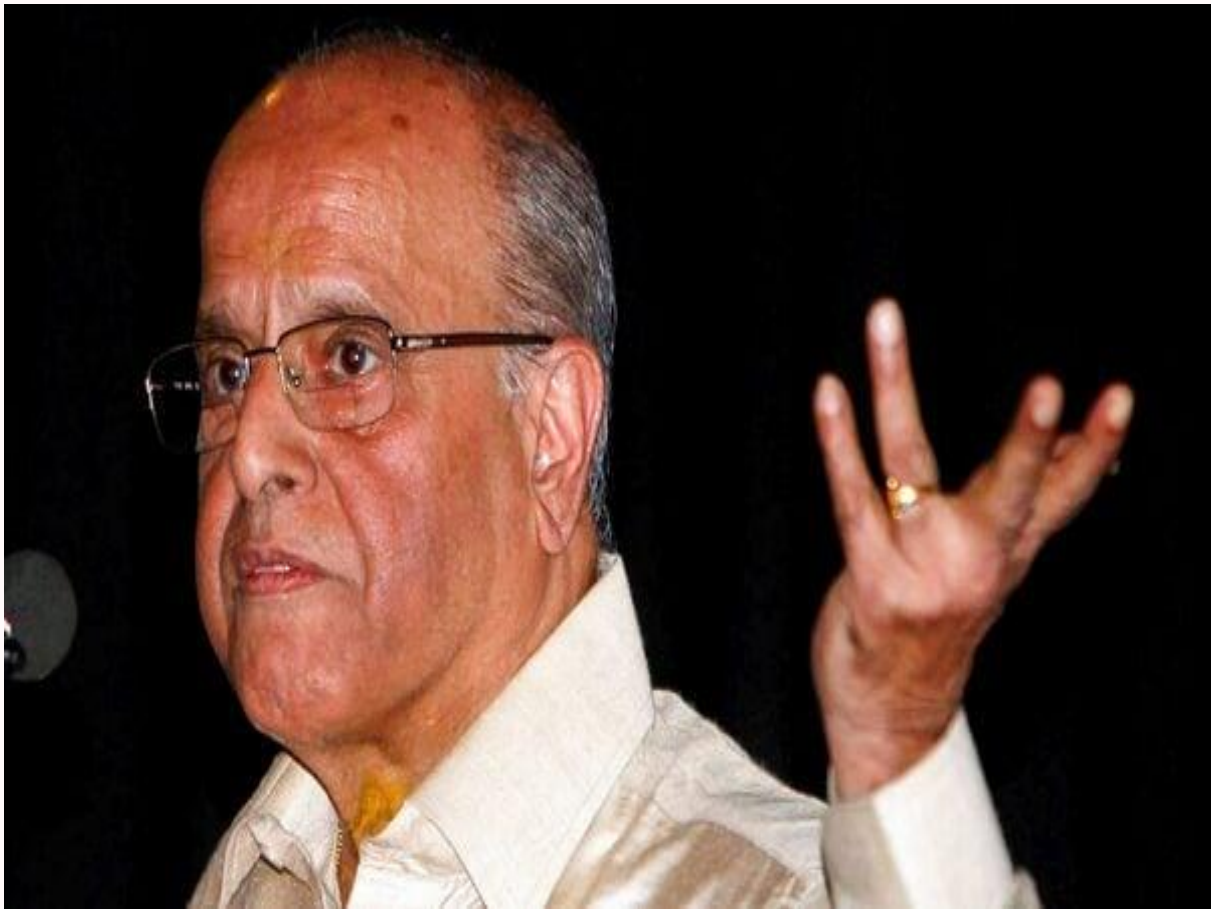


# Implement educational reforms in honour of Dr Kasturirangan (1940-2025)

Anurag Behar | 4 min read | 28 May 2025, 12:00 PM IST



Krishnaswamy Kasturirangan chaired the committee for the National Education Policy 2020. (PTI) (HT\_PRINT)

## SUMMARY

We must democratize Indian education in tribute to the vision of an educationist we're indebted to. He chaired the committee that gave India its National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Krishnaswamy Kasturirangan passed away on 25 April 2025. Countless have contributed to building India, and his name will be among the top. But even the faintest of allusions to any such thing would have had him divert credit to his team, mentors, friends and the circumstances. Anybody but himself. So, I have wondered what tribute to pay him.

I have found a solution. I am writing about a book that I gave him in October 2017 as we started work on what became the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), whose committee he chaired. Let us go back 60 years.

The Kothari Commission report in 1966 presented India with our first comprehensive blueprint for educational transformation, adopted as the National Policy on Education in 1968. J.P. Naik, the commission's member secretary, was its chief architect. His 1979 book *Education Commission and After* offers an assessment of that critical first decade of implementation, a period that revealed both the extraordinary promise of systemic reform and the sobering realities that derailed it.

The Commission's vision was for a radical re-imagining of education as a great democratizing force. Its proposed Common School System was designed to dismantle the entrenched apartheid between elite private institutions and under-resourced government schools. The Commission understood that educational equity required more than just access. It needed the social mixing that comes when children from all backgrounds learn together in quality neighbourhood schools. But this vision collided with India's deeply stratified social order. State governments, those professing socialist commitment included, lacked the political courage to challenge powerful constituencies invested in maintaining educational segregation. The result was a system that paid rhetorical homage to equity while reinforcing inequities in practice.

The financial timidity that undermined the Commission's proposals remains a damning indictment of the approach actually taken. Its recommendation to allocate 6% of GDP to education— arrived at through careful study of global benchmarks and India's developmental needs—was an actionable proposal.

Yet, this target was never approached in the critical first decade, with expenditure hovering only around 2.8% in the early 1970s. Naik traces how this chronic underinvestment created cascading failures: teacher salaries were woefully inadequate, training schemes were starved of resources and infrastructure development lagged disastrously. Vocational education, envisioned as a bridge between schooling and employment, also faced neglect—with penetration of under 5% in India's secondary schools by the mid-1970s against a target of 50%. Teacher empowerment, another cornerstone of the Commission's framework, met a similarly dispiriting fate. While new teacher training institutions emerged, their impact was diluted by formalism and inconsistent standards. The National Council for Teacher Education, set up in 1973 as a watchdog, found its recommendations routinely ignored by state governments, and soon became dysfunctional. What should have been a professional renaissance became another exercise in box-ticking, with teacher autonomy and creativity becoming casualties of a rigid administrative mindset.

Naik's analysis identifies several reasons for this implementation deficit.

*First*, we lacked accountability mechanisms. The Commission's recommendations remained advisory rather than mandatory, allowing governments to cherry-pick convenient elements while ignoring challenging reforms.

*Second*, there was little effort to resolve the inherent tension between central vision and state implementation. We needed genuine accommodation of local contexts while keeping the policy's spirit intact. The Commission had wisely advocated

substantial local autonomy in educational matters. In practice, the system became mired in bureaucratic centralization at every level without much accountability. Perhaps most critically, Naik highlights the absence of any sustained public mobilization to demand these reforms. Unlike land reforms or linguistic movements that captured the popular imagination, educational reforms remained largely an elite concern. This meant successive governments treated education as a secondary priority, vulnerable to budgetary cuts and political expediency. The Commission's vision required building a broad social consensus around education as a public good, but it never materialized.

If you are interested and invested in India, and not necessarily just in Indian education, Naik's book is worth reading for its clear-eyed view of our country. After our work was done on NEP 2020, one day Dr Rangan, as I called him, called me and said, "You will write our 'Education Commission and After in 2030'." It was not a question. Rarely did he ask anything directly, so I said, "Yes sir, I will." That could be a tribute to him, one that he will not be able to turn away from. But for that, we need to learn from J.P. Naik's experience and implement the NEP 2020, if not in full measure, at least very substantially. That would be the real tribute to him.

*The author is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.*