

## **A Sociological Review on Education Reform in India: In the Context of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**

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### **Abstract:**

Education in India constitutes a central institution for socialisation, citizenship formation, and socio-economic mobility, yet access and outcomes remain structured by enduring inequalities of caste, class, gender, disability, region, and language. This study undertakes a sociological review of educational reform in India, with specific reference to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which proposes a system-wide restructuring from early childhood education to higher education. Adopting a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, the analysis examines key policy reforms including the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, Early Childhood Care and Education, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy initiatives, multilingual pedagogy, competency-based assessment reforms, vocational integration, multidisciplinary higher education, credit transfer and multiple entry–exit pathways, digital learning platforms, and regulatory reorganisation, and evaluates their implications for equity and social stratification. The findings indicate that NEP 2020 articulates a comprehensive equity-oriented agenda; however, its transformative potential is contingent upon implementation capacity, adequate financing, teacher preparation, and coordinated governance within India’s federal framework. The study concludes that NEP 2020 must be assessed not only as policy design but as a social process mediated by institutional and structural conditions.

**Keywords:** NEP 2020, education reform, sociological perspective, inequality, social mobility, inclusion, India.

### **Introduction:**

Education is a powerful instrument of socialisation, social mobility, and nation-building. In India, education has played a crucial role in shaping democratic citizenship, economic growth, and social reform. However, persistent inequalities based on caste, class, gender, disability, region, and language continue to shape educational access and outcomes. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) seeks to transform India’s education system into a holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and equitable framework aligned with 21st-century needs. Introduced by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, the policy aims to achieve universal access to quality education, promote foundational literacy, integrate vocational training, and foster critical thinking. From a sociological perspective, education reform is not merely administrative restructuring; it is a process of reshaping social relations, power structures, and opportunities. Therefore, NEP 2020 must be examined in relation to India’s historical inequalities, cultural pluralism, and socio-economic transformations. Education reform is a consequential public project because education functions simultaneously as an institutional system, a cultural process, and a mechanism through which societies distribute

opportunities and reproduce hierarchies. In the Indian context, the education system has long been shaped by deep social stratifications, caste, class, gender, language, religion, region, and disability status that influence access, participation, learning quality, and post-education mobility. A sociological review of education reform, therefore, cannot be limited to administrative design or curricular intent; it must examine how reform agendas interact with social structures, institutional capacities, and everyday educational experiences across diverse communities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents India's most comprehensive policy shift in education in several decades, replacing the 1986/1992 policy framework and proposing system-wide change from early childhood education to higher education. The policy presents itself as a blueprint for transforming India into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, anchored in the guiding pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability (Ministry of Education, Government of India, n.d.). NEP 2020 positions education as central to both national development and social justice, foregrounding a reform vision that claims to be learner-centred, multidisciplinary, and oriented toward holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020). From a sociological standpoint, such a vision invites scrutiny because broad national goals, however progressive in language, are mediated by unequal institutional conditions, uneven resource allocation, and historically entrenched patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

At the level of school education, NEP 2020 introduces major structural and pedagogical proposals, including a transition to the 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure, a stronger policy emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), and a renewed commitment to reducing rote learning through competency-based, experiential, and holistic approaches (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy identifies Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as an urgent national priority, reflecting the premise that early learning deficits can become cumulative and shape later educational outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020). Sociologically, the FLN agenda is significant because learning deficits are not distributed randomly: they correlate with social and economic disadvantage and are intensified by weaker institutional capacity in underserved areas. Evidence from nationwide rural learning assessments indicates persistent concerns regarding learning outcomes, even as enrolment remains high (ASER Centre, 2023). This raises a central question for sociological review, whether reform measures will interrupt patterns of educational disadvantage or inadvertently normalise them through uneven implementation.

NEP 2020 also places substantial emphasis on language and multilingualism, encouraging the use of mother tongue or regional languages as the medium of instruction in early years where feasible, while advocating multilingual exposure and flexibility (Ministry of Education, 2020). Language policy is sociologically consequential because language functions as both a pedagogical medium and a form of cultural capital. While mother-tongue instruction can support comprehension and participation for first-generation learners, it may also intersect with social aspirations and labour-market perceptions, especially where English is associated with mobility and status. Accordingly, language reforms require analysis of not only pedagogical feasibility but also the social meanings attached to language choice, the availability of resources across languages, and the potential for differentiated educational trajectories by social group. In addition, the policy's focus on vocational education and skill development,

alongside curricular flexibility, reshapes longstanding distinctions between academic and vocational learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). A sociological review must consider whether such initiatives expand genuine choice and dignity of labour, or whether they risk reinforcing social tracking where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be guided toward vocational pathways without equal access to high-quality academic options. These concerns are especially relevant in contexts where schooling is shaped by household economic pressures, local labour markets, and varying institutional quality. At the higher education level, NEP 2020 proposes wide-ranging changes such as multidisciplinary higher education, flexible entry and exit options with multiple credentials, credit transfer mechanisms, and institutional restructuring toward larger, multidisciplinary institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020). These reforms are frequently framed in terms of innovation, global competitiveness, and improved learning outcomes. Sociologically, however, flexibility can have unequal effects: students with stronger economic and social supports may benefit more from modular pathways, while students facing financial hardship may experience flexibility as an exit compelled by constraint rather than choice. Institutional consolidation, likewise, may improve governance and resources in some contexts while raising concerns about accessibility for learners in rural, remote, or historically underserved regions. These tensions highlight why reform evaluation must attend to distributional effects, not only formal policy design.

Crucially, the implementation environment for NEP 2020 is characterised by India's federal structure, variation in state capacity, and the complex administrative ecosystem linking central ministries, state departments, regulatory bodies, and diverse institutions. Public summaries of NEP-related reforms and action points underscore the breadth of change envisioned across school and higher education (Press Information Bureau, 2022). Yet sociological inquiry emphasises that policy texts do not implement themselves: reform outcomes depend on governance arrangements, financing priorities, teacher preparation, institutional leadership, and the everyday practices through which policy is interpreted at district, school, and classroom levels. For this reason, a sociological review must treat NEP 2020 as a social process as much as a policy document, one shaped by negotiation, adaptation, resistance, and unequal capacity. This study, "A Sociological Review on Education Reform in India: In the Context of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020," situates NEP 2020 within the broader sociological debates on educational equity, social reproduction, and the relationship between education and citizenship. It examines the policy's reform claims, particularly regarding access, quality, and equity, through the lens of how educational change may reshape (or preserve) existing inequalities. It also considers how the policy's emphasis on inclusion aligns with global concerns regarding persistent gender disparities and the differentiated ways technology and institutional leadership shape educational participation and outcomes (UNESCO, 2024). Overall, the review aims to contribute a balanced, evidence-informed assessment that recognises NEP 2020's transformative ambitions while critically evaluating the social conditions under which those ambitions can be realised.

### **Historical Background of Education Reform in India:**

Education reform in India has developed through successive phases shaped by colonial administration, constitutional nation-building, and post-liberalisation governance priorities.

During the colonial period, state-supported schooling expanded in a manner that largely served administrative and elite interests, producing uneven access and persistent stratification across regions, classes, and genders. After independence (1947), education policy was reoriented toward democratic citizenship, economic development, and social justice, with the Constitution establishing a normative commitment to expanding educational opportunity and, over time, strengthening education as a rights-based entitlement. India's first National Policy on Education was introduced in 1968, followed by a revised version in 1986 with modifications in 1992. For over three decades, these policies guided educational planning despite rapid global economic and technological shifts. The NEP 2020 emerged in this context, aiming for a holistic, inclusive, and flexible education system rooted in equity and aligned with global standards. From a sociological standpoint, NEP 2020 responds to structural constraints in Indian education, including low foundational learning outcomes, rigid curricular structures, and systemic exclusion of marginal populations, while conceptualising education as a driver of social mobility and national development.

### **Research Questions:**

- I. What are the major education reforms and sociological implications of these reforms proposed under NEP 2020?
- II. What are the Sociological Perspectives and the key implementation challenges of NEP 2020 reforms?

### **Main Objectives:**

- I. To analyse the major education reforms and sociological implications of these reforms proposed under NEP 2020.
- II. To evaluate the Sociological Perspectives and the key implementation challenges of NEP 2020 reforms.

### **Methods:**

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine and discuss key findings on education reform in India under NEP 2020 from a sociological perspective. It relies on secondary data drawn from credible sources, such as books, peer-reviewed journals, policy reports, scholarly articles, and reputable online publications. These materials were systematically reviewed and organised to identify recurring patterns, major themes, and relevant theoretical insights that help explain the aims, assumptions, and social implications of NEP 2020.

### **Findings & Discussion:**

The study's findings and discussions are theoretically analysed based on research questions-

RQ I: What are the major education reforms and sociological implications of these reforms proposed under NEP 2020?

One of NEP's most visible reforms is the replacement of the traditional 10+2 school structure with a 5+3+3+4 design that includes early childhood education as a formal stage. The introduction of flexible pathways and multidisciplinary learning is intended to reduce rigidity in educational trajectories and support lifelong learning. This redesign has the potential to

reduce dropout rates and encourage continuous learning, especially among disadvantaged groups. By integrating vocational and academic streams, the policy attempts to bridge education with employability and local socio-economic needs. However, without adequate infrastructure and teacher support, such restructuring may inadvertently deepen inequalities, as affluent groups adapt faster to systemic changes than disadvantaged learners.

NEP 2020 prioritises foundational literacy and numeracy in the early years of schooling with the NIPUN Bharat mission and activity-based learning methodologies. Foundational learning is crucial to breaking cycles of educational disadvantage, particularly in rural and low-income areas. Sociologically, early cognitive development and literacy are linked to long-term educational attainment and employment opportunities, reducing systemic barriers to social mobility.

The policy strongly advocates mother-tongue or regional language instruction at least until Grade 5, aiming to preserve linguistic diversity and make education accessible at the grassroots level. Instruction in the mother tongue supports cognitive development and cultural continuity in diverse linguistic communities. However, given the dominance of English in higher education and employment, this reform could create a two-tier system, where English-medium education continues to be seen as more prestigious and advantageous, potentially reinforcing socio-economic divides.

The NEP 2020 retains India's reservation systems for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backwards Classes (OBC), and introduces measures for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) to enhance access and retention in education. Affirmative action policies seek to counter historical exclusion and promote representation from marginalised communities. While reservation ensures formal access, hidden costs, digital divides, and societal discrimination may still hinder equal participation. Achieving substantive equity thus requires deeper investment in support systems beyond mere admissions quotas.

The NEP 2020 moves away from high-stakes exams toward competency-based, formative assessment that evaluates higher-order thinking and practical skills, supported by the establishment of PARAKH - a centralised assessment body. This shift reflects a global trend toward holistic education, aiming to reduce stress and rote learning typical in traditional Indian schooling. Yet, unequal teacher training and resource availability across regions may lead to inconsistent implementation and outcomes, perpetuating educational inequality.

The NEP 2020 promotes multidisciplinary learning, flexible curricular choices, multiple entry-exit options, and the creation of an Academic Bank of Credits to facilitate mobility across institutions and fields. Additionally, it proposes replacing multiple regulatory bodies with a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). Multidisciplinary learning can democratize knowledge, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to pursue diverse interests. Centralised regulation and flexible degrees may broaden access, but implementation depends on institutional capacities and equitable resource distribution.

The NEP envisions digital platforms (e.g., DIKSHA, SWAYAM) and a National Educational Technology Forum to strengthen digital learning. While digital integration can enhance access, especially in remote areas, the digital divide unequal access to devices, connectivity, and digital

literacy remains a major socio-economic challenge. Without targeted investment in infrastructure and digital inclusion, such reforms risk widening disparities rather than bridging them.

RQ II: What are the Sociological Perspectives and the key implementation challenges of NEP 2020 reforms?

### **The Sociological Perspectives of NEP 2020 reforms-**

From a functionalist viewpoint, education maintains social stability by transmitting norms, values, and skills. NEP 2020 strengthens this function by promoting character development, constitutional values, and global citizenship.

Conflict theorists argue that education often reproduces inequality. Elite institutions, English-medium dominance, and digital divides reinforce class hierarchies. NEP 2020's emphasis on inclusion and equitable access attempts to address these structural imbalances, though implementation challenges remain.

At the micro-level, classroom interactions shape identity and self-esteem. Multilingual education and competency-based assessment proposed in NEP 2020 may foster inclusive learning environments, reducing stigmatisation of marginalised learners.

NEP replaces the 10+2 structure with a 5+3+3+4 design, integrating Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This reform recognises the sociological importance of early socialisation in shaping cognitive and emotional development. Reduces early learning gaps among disadvantaged children, promotes equity from foundational years, and aligns with child development psychology. However, rural and economically weaker regions may face infrastructural limitations in implementing ECCE effectively.

Through initiatives like NIPUN Bharat, NEP prioritises universal foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3. Breaks intergenerational cycles of illiteracy, enhances long-term employability, and reduces early dropout rates. Without adequate teacher training and monitoring, however, disparities may persist.

India's linguistic diversity is immense. NEP 2020 advocates mother-tongue instruction at least until Grade 5. Strengthens cultural identity and cognitive development, encourages inclusion of tribal and regional languages, and counters cultural homogenization. Yet, English remains associated with upward mobility. This duality may create a symbolic hierarchy of languages, reinforcing socio-economic stratification.

NEP identifies Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backwards Classes (OBC), Minorities, Women, and Persons with disabilities. Education is a tool of empowerment. Expanding scholarships, gender inclusion funds, and special education zones can promote social justice. However, Structural poverty, Gender norms, Caste discrimination, and digital divide may limit the transformative potential of policy provisions.

NEP proposes transforming higher education institutions into multidisciplinary universities and phasing out single-stream colleges. Democratizes knowledge, breaks rigid academic hierarchies, and encourages creativity and innovation.

The Academic Bank of Credits allows flexible entry and exit options. The Supports working students, encourages lifelong learning, and reduces dropouts. However, mobility may remain limited for economically disadvantaged students lacking financial stability.

The establishment of a unified Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) aims to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation. From a sociological perspective, centralised regulation may improve accountability but must ensure federal sensitivity and state autonomy.

The NEP integrates vocational training from Grade 6 onwards. Traditionally, vocational work in India has been associated with caste-based occupations. Integrating vocational education into mainstream schooling may: Reduce stigma, promote dignity of labour, and enhance employability. However, careful implementation is required to prevent tracking of marginalised groups into lower-status vocational streams.

NEP promotes digital platforms such as SWAYAM and DIKSHA. Urban-rural digital gap, Gendered access to technology, Economic inequality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital disparities became evident. Without infrastructure investment, digital expansion may widen inequalities.

NEP emphasises gender inclusion funds and girls' education. Education enhances women's empowerment, workforce participation, and social status. However, patriarchy, early marriage, and safety concerns continue to restrict female educational attainment in many regions.

The policy aligns with inclusive principles and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). Inclusive classrooms, assistive technologies, and teacher training are crucial. Sociologically, inclusive education fosters social integration and reduces stigma. Yet, infrastructural barriers and a lack of specialised support staff remain challenges.

Education is traditionally viewed as a pathway to upward mobility. NEP's holistic and flexible approach aims to: Increase Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), promote skill-based learning, and enhance global competitiveness. However, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital reminds us that middle and upper-class students may adapt more easily to reforms due to existing advantages.

### **Implementation Challenges of NEP 2020 reforms-**

Despite the aspirational vision of NEP 2020, the translation of policy into practice reveals several challenges-

- **Resource and Infrastructure Gaps:** Many states lack classrooms, labs, and trained teachers to operationalise foundational reforms or holistic assessments equitably across rural and urban areas.
- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** Comprehensive orientation is required for teachers to embrace new pedagogies and multisectoral roles. Shortcomings

in teacher education institutions and professional learning systems hinder reform adoption.

- **State-Centre, Dynamics and Policy Continuity:** Education is a concurrent subject in India; variability in state adoption and political commitment can affect uniform implementation.
- **Cultural Resistance and Inequality:** Persistent socio-cultural norms, particularly gender bias and caste hierarchies, can influence educational access and outcomes despite policy provisions.

### **Conclusion:**

The NEP 2020 represents a visionary blueprint for education reform in India, driven by principles of equity, flexibility, and holistic learning. From a sociological standpoint, its potential impact on access, cultural inclusion, and social mobility is significant, but not automatic. Meaningful transformation depends upon implementation fidelity, active engagement with structural inequalities, and sustained political, financial, and institutional commitment. Through sociological lenses, education reform becomes a site where issues of identity, power, inequality, and opportunity must be negotiated and where policy goals must be matched with social realities. The National Education Policy 2020 represents a transformative shift in India's educational philosophy and structure. From a sociological perspective, it attempts to address structural inequalities, promote inclusion, and align education with social and economic development. However, education reform is deeply embedded within broader social realities. Caste hierarchies, gender norms, economic disparities, and regional imbalances continue to influence educational outcomes. Therefore, NEP 2020 must be implemented with sustained political will, equitable funding, and community participation. If executed effectively, NEP 2020 has the potential to reshape Indian society by fostering inclusive growth, social justice, and knowledge-based development. If inadequately implemented, however, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Education reform, therefore, remains not only a policy initiative but a sociological project of social transformation.

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