



A Critical Analysis of India's National Education Policy 2020 and its Alignment with the UN SDGs

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, analysing its potential to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on Quality Education. It highlights the historical context of India's education system, outlining challenges of access, equity, and rote learning. The urgency for reform is emphasized by the widening skill gap and the need to equip graduates for the 21st-century job market. The paper then explores NEP 2020's provisions, aligning them with the five SDG 4 targets: universal access, equity, foundational literacy and numeracy, competency-based learning, and lifelong learning opportunities. The policy's emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, and vocational training is examined in the context of promoting sustainable economic growth and decent work (SDG 8) and gender equality (SDG 5). However, the paper acknowledges significant challenges to successful implementation. Resource constraints, teacher training, and ensuring equitable access in marginalized communities are identified as hurdles. Additionally, limitations within NEP 2020 itself are explored, including potential overemphasis on foundational skills at the expense of higher-order thinking and the limitations of standardized assessments. The article concludes by advocating for innovative financing mechanisms, robust teacher training programs, collaboration with social welfare agencies, and a culture of educational research and development to bridge these gaps. Overall, the paper offers a balanced analysis of NEP 2020's potential to transform India's education system and contribute to achieving SDG 4. It underscores the need for effective implementation strategies to overcome challenges and harness the policy's transformative power for a more sustainable and equitable future.

Keywords: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), Education Quality, Equity in Education, Skill Gap, Holistic Education

Introduction

Education in India boasts a rich and multifaceted history, shaped by evolving political and social landscapes. Prior to British colonization, education was largely decentralized, with indigenous institutions like gurukuls and pathshalas imparting traditional knowledge and religious teachings (Sharma & Sharma, 1996). The arrival of the British Raj in the 18th century marked a shift towards a more centralized and westernized education system. The Woods Despatch of 1854 laid the foundation for this system, prioritizing English-medium instruction and the filtration theory, aiming to produce a limited number of Indians qualified for administrative roles (Sharma & Sharma, 1996; Tschurennev & Mhaskar, 2023).

Post-independence, the Indian government prioritized expanding access to education, enshrined as a fundamental right in the Constitution (Bhat, 2022). Policies like the National Policy on Education (1968) and the Program of Action (1986) aimed at universal elementary education and reducing gender disparities (Pragya, 2023; Tilak, & Bandyopadhyay, 2023). However, concerns persisted regarding the quality and relevance of education, with a continued emphasis on rote learning and examinations (Kumar, 2021).

India's education system has witnessed significant growth in recent decades. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at the elementary level has reached nearly 100%, indicating near-universal access to primary education. Additionally, India boasts a rapidly expanding higher education sector, with the number of universities and colleges witnessing a substantial rise (MHRD, 2021).

However, significant challenges persist. While access has improved, concerns regarding learning outcomes remain. Standardized test scores often reveal a disconnect between years of schooling and actual learning (Naik et al., 2020). The curriculum's emphasis on rote learning is often criticized for failing to equip students with critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills crucial for success in the 21st century (Kumar, 2021). Furthermore, disparities in educational access and quality persist across socioeconomic groups and geographical regions, hindering social mobility and perpetuating inequities (MHRD, 2020).

The 21st century demands a skilled and adaptable workforce capable of navigating a rapidly evolving globalized economy. Technological advancements are transforming job markets, requiring individuals to possess a diverse range of skills beyond traditional academic knowledge (World Bank, 2017). Skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, digital literacy, and effective communication are increasingly sought after by employers (Bhardwaj et al., 2024).

India faces a critical juncture in this dynamic landscape. Despite a growing population with a significant youth bulge, concerns prevail regarding the employability of graduates. Skill gaps exist between the skills imparted by the education system and the demands of the job market (Colclough & De, 2010). This mismatch between education and employability creates a significant hurdle for India's economic growth and individual opportunities (Kumar, 2021). Bridging this gap and nurturing a skilled workforce are crucial for India's future development.

In recognition of the aforementioned challenges and the need to transform the education system, the Government of India launched the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (MHRD, 2020). This ambitious policy outlines a roadmap for overhauling education from early childhood care to higher education, aiming to equip learners with the 21st-century skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). This article critically analyses NEP 2020 and its potential to align with the UN Sustainable Development Agenda and the Centrality of Education (SDG 4). By examining the policy's provisions through the lens of access, equity, and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities, this study aims to assess its potential contribution to achieving India's sustainable development goals and creating a future where education empowers all individuals to reach their full potential.

The urgency of addressing these challenges is further emphasized by recent research by Khare (2014) highlighting the widening skill gap between graduates and industry requirements. They argue that this gap not only limits individual career prospects but also hinders India's potential to compete effectively in the global knowledge economy.

In response to these pressing concerns, the Government of India launched the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (MHRD, 2020). NEP 2020 is a landmark policy document outlining a comprehensive vision for transforming India's education system. It emphasizes a shift towards a more holistic and competency-based pedagogy, with a renewed focus on developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). The policy also recognizes the importance of lifelong learning opportunities and proposes a revamped framework for vocational training and adult education (Dey & Srivastava, 2022).

This article critically examines NEP 2020's potential to address the aforementioned challenges and contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) – Quality Education. By analysing the policy's provisions through the lens of access, equity, and the promotion of lifelong learning, this study aims to assess its potential to create a future where education empowers all individuals (United Nations, 2023) to reach their full potential and contribute to a more just and sustainable society.

The UN Sustainable Development Agenda and the Centrality of Education

In 2015, the United Nations ushered in a new era of global cooperation with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This ambitious framework outlines 17 interconnected goals aimed at achieving a more sustainable and equitable future for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2023). Recognizing the complex interplay between environmental, social, and economic spheres, the SDGs emphasize a holistic approach to development (van Soest et al., 2019). Among these interconnected goals, SDG 4 - Quality Education - stands out as a cornerstone for achieving sustainable development across all dimensions.

The focus on education within the SDGs is not simply coincidental. Education equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century, including climate change, technological advancements, and social inequalities (Antoninis et al., 2020; Kumar et al.,

2021). It empowers individuals to participate actively in democratic societies, fostering social cohesion and responsible citizenship (World Bank, 2017). Furthermore, education plays a critical role in promoting economic growth. By nurturing a skilled workforce equipped with critical thinking, problem-solving, and technological skills, education fuels innovation and entrepreneurship, driving sustainable economic development (Kumar et al., 2021).

Education's contribution extends beyond economic benefits. It holds the key to environmental sustainability. By fostering environmental literacy and promoting responsible stewardship practices, education empowers individuals to make informed decisions concerning the environment (Antoninis et al., 2020). Additionally, education plays a crucial role in mitigating climate change by nurturing the knowledge and skills necessary for developing and deploying sustainable technologies (Mokski et al., 2023).

The centrality of education within the SDGs is further underscored by its interconnectedness with other goals. For instance, achieving gender equality (SDG 5) is intricately linked to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all girls and boys (SDG 4) (Agarwal, 2018; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Educated women are empowered to make informed choices about their health and families, contributing to improved health outcomes (SDG 3) (Agarwal, 2018; Smith & Sinkford, 2022; Parihar et al., 2024). Similarly, education serves as a powerful tool for promoting peace and reducing poverty (SDGs 1 and 16), by fostering tolerance, critical thinking, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully (Antoninis et al., 2020).

NEP 2020 and its Alignment with SDG 4 Targets

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 demonstrates a significant step towards aligning with the broader agenda of the UN SDGs. While its core focus lies in achieving SDG 4, NEP 2020's provisions have the potential to contribute to the advancement of other SDGs as well.

The policy's emphasis on fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation skills aligns with SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth. Equipping graduates with these 21st-century skills is crucial for promoting entrepreneurship, technological advancement, and economic diversification, all of which are essential for sustainable economic growth (Kumar et al., 2021). Furthermore, NEP 2020's focus on gender equality in education resonates with SDG 5 - Gender Equality. By dismantling gender barriers in access and quality of education, NEP 2020 empowers women to participate more actively in the workforce and contribute to social and economic development (Parihar et al., 2024).

NEP 2020 rests upon five foundational pillars: access, equity, affordability, accountability, and quality (MHRD, 2020). These pillars directly contribute to achieving quality education as outlined in SDG 4. Firstly, the policy emphasizes universal access to quality education from early childhood care to higher education. This aligns with SDG 4, Target 4.1, which aims to "ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes" (United Nations, 2023).

Secondly, NEP 2020 prioritizes bridging equity gaps in education. This focus resonates with SDG 4, Target 4.5, which strives to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations" (United Nations, 2023). The policy's provisions for inclusive education, including support for children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, aim to create a more equitable learning environment.

NEP 2020 outlines several specific features that directly address the different targets within SDG 4. One crucial aspect is the emphasis on developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills in the early years (SDG 4, Target 4.6). The policy proposes a redesigned pedagogical approach focusing on activity-based learning and language development in the foundational stage (MHRD, 2020).

Furthermore, NEP 2020 introduces a competency-based curriculum that goes beyond rote learning and emphasizes critical thinking and problem-solving skills (SDG 4, Target 4.7). This shift aims to equip learners with the skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex world and contribute to a knowledge-based economy (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). The policy also promotes a holistic approach to education, integrating subjects like arts, physical education, and vocational training into the curriculum (MHRD, 2020). This aligns with SDG 4's emphasis on providing learners with knowledge and skills for sustainable development (SDG 4, Target 4.7).

Additionally, NEP 2020 proposes continuous professional development for teachers and a strengthened school governance system to enhance the overall quality of education (MHRD, 2020). These measures contribute to achieving SDG 4, Target 4.c, which calls for "increasing the supply of qualified teachers, including through

enhanced initial teacher training and continuous professional development, so that all students have access to qualified teachers" (United Nations, 2023).

Finally, NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of lifelong learning opportunities (SDG 4, Target 4.4). The policy proposes a flexible credit transfer system and multiple pathways for re-entry into education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for individuals across different stages of life (MHRD, 2020). This aligns with the evolving nature of the job market and the need for continuous skill development in the 21st century (World Bank, 2017).

Critical Analysis and Challenges

While NEP 2020 presents a comprehensive vision for transforming India's education system, translating this vision into reality necessitates navigating significant challenges. Resource allocation and infrastructure development pose critical hurdles. Effectively implementing NEP 2020's ambitious goals hinges on substantial financial investment (Banerjee et al., 2021). Upgrading infrastructure across schools, particularly in rural areas, requires significant funding for building renovations, improvements in sanitation facilities, and equipping classrooms with technological resources (MHRD, 2020). Furthermore, attracting and retaining qualified teachers, especially in specialized subjects and remote locations, necessitates competitive salaries and improved working conditions (Pandey, 2019). Bridging this financial gap requires innovative funding mechanisms beyond traditional government budgetary allocations. Public-private partnerships and exploring alternative financing models like social impact bonds could be potential avenues for resource mobilization (Banerjee et al., 2021).

Another significant challenge lies in teacher training and capacity building. NEP 2020 emphasizes a shift towards a more activity-based and student-centric pedagogy (MHRD, 2020). However, many teachers lack the necessary training and skills to effectively implement this pedagogical approach. Investing in comprehensive professional development programs that equip teachers with the requisite skills and knowledge is crucial (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). Additionally, fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development among teachers is essential for adapting to the evolving educational landscape (Kumar et al., 2021).

Beyond resource constraints, ensuring equitable access across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds remains a challenge. While NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusion and providing targeted support to marginalized communities, socioeconomic disparities continue to impact educational opportunities (MHRD, 2020). Addressing issues like child labour, lack of parental support, and inadequate infrastructure in marginalized communities demands multifaceted interventions beyond the education sector. Collaboration with social welfare agencies and community-based organizations is crucial for creating a supportive ecosystem that empowers children from disadvantaged backgrounds to access and thrive in education (Antoninis et al., 2020).

Furthermore, achieving complete alignment with SDG 4 necessitates addressing limitations within NEP 2020 itself. The policy's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy skills is crucial (MHRD, 2020). However, some scholars argue that a sole focus on these skills might overshadow the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, all of which are equally important for success in the 21st century (Sarkar & Singh, 2020). Striking a balance between foundational skills and fostering higher-order thinking skills is essential for ensuring a holistic learning experience aligned with SDG 4's emphasis on lifelong learning and the acquisition of knowledge and skills for sustainable development (United Nations, 2023).

Another potential limitation lies in the policy's focus on standardized assessments. While assessments can provide valuable data for monitoring progress, overreliance on standardized tests can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and "teaching to the test" (Kumar et al., 2021). Developing a more multifaceted assessment system that encompasses diverse learning outcomes beyond rote memorization is necessary for a more holistic evaluation of student progress, aligning better with the spirit of SDG 4.

Lastly, achieving SDG 4 necessitates fostering a culture of innovation and research within the education system. NEP 2020 encourages the integration of vocational training and entrepreneurship education into the curriculum (MHRD, 2020). However, nurturing a robust ecosystem for educational research and development is crucial for continually innovating pedagogical approaches and curriculum content to keep pace with the rapid advancements in a globalized world (Kumar et al., 2021). Enhancing research collaborations between universities, educational institutions, and the private sector can foster innovation and ensure that India's education system remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the 21st century.

Concluding Remarks

Successfully implementing NEP 2020 requires addressing significant resource constraints. Innovative financing mechanisms beyond traditional government allocations are crucial. Public-private partnerships and exploring alternative financing models like social impact bonds hold promise. Additionally, attracting and

retaining qualified teachers necessitates competitive salaries and improved working conditions. Investing in comprehensive professional development programs equips teachers with the skills to implement the policy's student-centred pedagogy. Fostering a culture of continuous learning among teachers ensures adaptation to the evolving educational landscape.

Bridging the equity gap in education demands multifaceted interventions. Collaboration with social welfare agencies and community-based organizations is essential for creating a supportive ecosystem that empowers children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Addressing issues like child labour, lack of parental support, and inadequate infrastructure in marginalized communities requires a holistic approach beyond the education sector itself. Furthermore, ensuring complete alignment with SDG 4 necessitates a critical evaluation of NEP 2020 itself. While the policy's emphasis on foundational skills is crucial, it should not overshadow the development of critical thinking and creativity. Striking a balance between these is essential. Additionally, a more multifaceted assessment system that goes beyond rote memorization and focuses on diverse learning outcomes is necessary for a more holistic evaluation of student progress. Finally, fostering a culture of innovation and research within the education system is crucial for keeping pace with the rapid advancements of the 21st century. Enhancing research collaborations between universities, educational institutions, and the private sector can ensure India's education system remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the globalized world.

NEP 2020 presents a comprehensive vision for transforming India's education system and achieving SDG 4. However, navigating resource constraints, ensuring equitable access, and addressing limitations within the policy itself are crucial for successful implementation. By adopting innovative financing mechanisms, investing in teacher training, fostering collaboration with social welfare agencies, and promoting a culture of research and innovation, India can harness the transformative potential of NEP 2020 and create a future where education empowers all individuals to attain their full potential and contribute to a sustainable future.

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