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W14 : Reimagining Education: A Sociological Analysis of NEP 2020's Challenges and Future Outcomes

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Abstract: This paper examines the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 from a sociological perspective, focusing on its structural challenges and possible future outcomes in India. While the policy promises a more holistic, multidisciplinary, and inclusive model of education, its implementation is shaped by deep social inequalities and institutional limits. Drawing on the ideas of Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, B. R. Ambedkar, and Mahatma Gandhi, the paper understands education as both a means of social reproduction and a possible source of change.

The paper highlights uneven governance, low public investment, persistent caste and class inequality, the digital divide, and limits in pedagogy and curriculum reform. These are not only administrative problems; they are structural conditions that shape both access to education and the social effects it produces.

Using a scenario-based approach, the paper argues that NEP 2020 can support inclusion and social mobility only if implementation is backed by stronger institutions and a more equal distribution of resources. Otherwise, the policy may reproduce old inequalities in new forms. Its transformative promise depends less on policy language alone and more on a sustained commitment to structural change and social justice.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020; Sociology of Education; Social Inequality; Cultural Capital; Social Reproduction; Social Transformation; Digital Divide; Educational Reform; India

Introduction:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the Government of India in 2020, represents a significant shift in the trajectory of educational reform, marking the first comprehensive policy framework in over three decades. The policy envisions a transformation of the education system through a focus on holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning, while aligning education with the emerging demands of a global knowledge economy (Government of India, 2020). Emphasizing equity, access, quality, and accountability, NEP 2020 positions education as a central instrument for national development and social progress. This vision resonates with global policy discourses that link education to human capital formation and economic growth, as reflected in the World Development Report (World Bank, 2018, p. 5) and UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020, p. 15).

Despite its transformative aspirations, NEP 2020 must be situated within the broader context of India's deeply unequal social structure, characterized by persistent disparities based on class, caste, gender, and region. As Tilak (2020, p. 47) argues, educational reforms in India have historically been constrained by inadequate public investment and increasing privatization, limiting their capacity to ensure equitable access. Similarly, Jayaram (2020, p. 24) highlights that the expansion

of higher education has often resulted in “massification without equity,” reinforcing rather than reducing social inequalities.

This paper critically examines NEP 2020 through a sociological lens by addressing two key questions: first, what structural challenges constrain its implementation; and second, what future outcomes may emerge depending on how these challenges are addressed. It argues that NEP 2020 represents a site of tension between transformative potential and structural limitations, where outcomes remain contingent upon broader socio-economic and institutional dynamics.

Literature Review:

Sociological analyses of education have long emphasized its dual role as both a mechanism of social reproduction and a potential instrument of transformation. Marx’s analysis situates education within the broader ideological framework of capitalist society, where institutions contribute to the reproduction of labour power and class relations (Marx, 1990, p. 715; Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 66). Building on this, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital highlights how educational systems privilege dominant social groups by valuing specific cultural competencies, thereby reinforcing inequality (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 60). Similarly, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 35) argue that educational institutions systematically reproduce social hierarchies through everyday practices.

In contrast, transformative perspectives emphasize the emancipatory potential of education. Ambedkar (2014, p. 80) viewed education as a crucial tool for challenging caste-based inequalities and enabling marginalized communities to assert their rights. Gandhi’s concept of Nai Talim similarly proposed an alternative model of education rooted in ethical development, self-reliance, and the integration of manual and intellectual labour (Gandhi, 1951, p. 15). Illich (1971, p. 47) further critiques institutionalized education for reinforcing dependency and social control, suggesting the need for more flexible and learner-centered approaches.

Contemporary scholarship on NEP 2020 reflects these theoretical tensions. Tilak (2020, p. 47) highlights the challenges posed by inadequate public investment and growing privatization, while Jayaram (2020, p. 24) points to the persistence of inequality despite the expansion of higher education. Kumar (2019, p. 12) emphasizes the importance of pedagogical reform, arguing that meaningful change requires transformation in both curriculum and classroom practices. If we take all these points together, these perspectives suggest that the outcomes of NEP 2020 remain contingent upon its ability to address underlying structural landscape and inequalities.

Objectives of the Study

- To critically examine the National Education Policy 2020 from a sociological perspective.
- To identify the structural challenges in its implementation within the Indian context.
- To explore possible future outcomes based on different scenarios of policy implementation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, based on a critical review of policy documents, academic literature, and theoretical texts. The primary source of analysis is the *National Education Policy 2020* (Government of India 2020), supplemented by reports from international organizations such as UNESCO (2020) and the World Bank (2018).

The paper further engages with secondary literature, including journal articles and scholarly works that examine the challenges and implications of NEP 2020 in sociological framework. To provide a deeper analytical framework, the study draws on the theoretical perspectives of Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, B. R. Ambedkar, and Mahatma Gandhi, among others.

Rather than relying on empirical data collection, the paper applies a theoretical and interpretive method, with the aim of situating NEP 2020 within broader debates on education, inequality, and social transformation.

This approach allows for a critical understanding of the structural constraints shaping the policy's implementation and its potential future trajectories.

Structural Challenges in the Implementation of NEP 2020

- The implementation of NEP 2020 is not simply an administrative matter. It is shaped by institutional capacity, public resources, and persistent social inequality. Although the policy presents a transformative vision of holistic and inclusive education, its realization depends on the wider socio-economic and institutional context. These challenges are structural rather than merely technical, and they influence both access and outcomes.
- One major challenge lies in governance. India's education system depends on coordination between the centre, the states, and multiple regulatory bodies, which often produces uneven implementation across regions (Sharma & Kumar, 2021). Institutional capacity also varies widely, especially in state-level bodies and public universities. The shift toward multidisciplinary institutions adds further complexity. As Jayaram (2020, p. 23) notes, higher education in India has often expanded without comparable improvements in governance and infrastructure, raising doubts about whether policy goals can be effectively translated into practice.
- Economic constraints are equally important. NEP 2020 repeats the long-standing goal of spending 6 percent of GDP on education, yet public expenditure remains below that level. Tilak (2020, p. 46) argues that weak public investment has limited equitable expansion and increased dependence on private institutions. This has strengthened the commercialization of education, where access is shaped more by economic capacity. From a political economy perspective, the policy's emphasis on skill development and employability may deepen this trend unless it is balanced by a stronger commitment to equity and public provision.
- Social inequality remains a central obstacle to the implementation of NEP 2020. Disparities based on caste, class, gender, and region continue to shape educational opportunities despite policy commitments to inclusion. Ambedkar (2014, p. 79) saw education as a means of emancipation, yet structural barriers still limit that possibility for many communities. Students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds often face poor infrastructure, limited academic support, and weaker access to quality institutions (Mishra & Pandey, 2021; Singh, 2022). In this context, the flexibility and choice promoted by NEP 2020 may benefit those who already possess greater social and cultural advantage.

- The digital divide is another major challenge, especially because the policy strongly emphasizes technology-enabled learning. Although digital platforms can widen access, their benefits remain uneven because of differences in connectivity, device ownership, and digital literacy. Selwyn (2020, p. 4) argues that digital education often reproduces existing inequalities rather than overcoming them. In the Indian context, this suggests that digital expansion without adequate infrastructure and support may deepen exclusion instead of reducing it.
- Pedagogy and curriculum present a final challenge. NEP 2020 calls for a shift from rote learning to critical, experiential, and multidisciplinary education, but this requires much more than policy language. It depends on teacher training, institutional culture, and classroom practice. As Batra (2021) notes, teacher education in India remains underdeveloped. Without addressing these foundations, curricular reform may remain mostly formal rather than substantive.

Future Outcomes and Transformative Possibilities of NEP 2020

- The future trajectory of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 cannot be understood as a fixed or linear outcome; rather, it is contingent upon how effectively the structural challenges outlined earlier are addressed. From a sociological perspective, educational reform operates within a dynamic interaction between policy intent, institutional capacity, and existing social structures. As a result, the outcomes of NEP 2020 are likely to unfold along multiple trajectories, reflecting varying degrees of transformation, continuity, and contradiction.
- One possible situation is that of transformative inclusion, wherein effective implementation enables education to function as a tool for social mobility and democratic participation. This scenario presupposes increased public investment, improved institutional coordination, and equitable access to educational and digital resources. Under such conditions, education can contribute to reducing structural inequalities by expanding opportunities for historically marginalized groups. Ambedkar (2014, p. 80) emphasized that education has the potential to challenge entrenched social hierarchies and enable individuals to assert their rights, while UNESCO (2020, p. 18) highlights the role of inclusive education in fostering social cohesion and sustainable development. In this context, NEP 2020 may lead not only to improvements in educational access and quality but also to broader social changes, including enhanced mobility, greater participation in public life, and a gradual weakening of rigid social boundaries.
- A second trajectory may be characterized as partial or uneven transformation, where the implementation of NEP 2020 produces differentiated outcomes across regions and institutions. In this scenario, certain institutions—particularly those with better infrastructure and resources—may successfully adopt multidisciplinary and flexible educational models, while others struggle due to institutional and economic constraints. As Sharma and Kumar (2021) and Kaur (2022) suggest, variations in governance capacity and infrastructural readiness can significantly influence policy outcomes. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, such uneven implementation may reinforce existing inequalities, as students from socio-economically privileged backgrounds are better positioned to benefit from educational reforms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 34). Consequently, while the policy may lead to improvements in certain contexts, it may fall short of achieving its broader goals of equity and inclusion.

- A third and more critical condition involves the reproduction of inequality, wherein the structural constraints of the education system remain largely unaddressed. In such a scenario, ongoing trends such as privatization, underinvestment in public education, and digital exclusion may intensify existing disparities. Tilak (2020, p. 47) warns that the expansion of private education can deepen inequalities by linking access to economic capacity, while Selwyn (2020, p. 3) argues that digitalization often produces new forms of exclusion rather than eliminating existing ones. From a Marxist perspective, this trajectory reflects the continued alignment of education with market imperatives, where institutions contribute to the reproduction of class divisions (Marx, 1990, p. 714). In the Indian context, these processes may intersect with caste-based inequalities, leading to the persistence of hierarchical structures in modified forms rather than their elimination.
- It is important to note that these trajectories are not mutually exclusive. Given the diversity of the Indian educational landscape, elements of all three scenarios may coexist across different regions and institutional settings. The future of NEP 2020 is therefore analytically understood as an uneven and contested process, shaped by ongoing interactions between policy design, institutional realities, and broader social forces. Ultimately, the extent to which NEP 2020 can realize its transformative potential depends on whether it is able to address the structural inequalities that continue to shape educational access and outcomes.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper situates the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 within a broader sociological framework, highlighting the inherent tension between its transformative aspirations and the structural constraints that shape its implementation. While the policy articulates a progressive vision of holistic, inclusive, and multidisciplinary education, its realization remains contingent upon the socio-economic and institutional conditions of Indian society. As the discussion has demonstrated, challenges related to governance, public investment, social inequality, digital access, and pedagogy are not merely technical or administrative concerns, but reflections of deeper structural realities that continue to influence educational access and outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the dual nature of education as both a mechanism of social reproduction and a potential instrument of transformation remains central to understanding the trajectory of NEP 2020. Marx's (1990, p. 714) analysis underscores how educational institutions may reproduce existing class relations, while Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 35) highlight the role of cultural capital in sustaining social hierarchies. At the same time, the emancipatory visions articulated by Ambedkar (2014, p. 80) and Gandhi (1951, p. 15) remind us that education can serve as a powerful tool for social justice when it is aligned with principles of equality, dignity, and collective development. This duality suggests that the outcomes of NEP 2020 will depend not only on its policy framework but on the broader social conditions within which it is implemented.

In this context, realizing the transformative potential of NEP 2020 requires a sustained commitment to strengthening public education as a foundational pillar of the system. Greater public investment is essential not only for expanding access but also for ensuring quality and equity across regions and institutions. At the same time, addressing social disparities requires targeted efforts to support

marginalized communities, recognizing that formal access alone does not guarantee meaningful inclusion. The expansion of digital education, while offering new possibilities, must be accompanied by equitable infrastructure and access so that technological advancements do not reinforce existing inequalities. Similarly, institutional reforms should move toward more decentralized and participatory governance structures, enabling local adaptation and greater accountability within the education system.

Equally important is the need to transform pedagogy and curriculum in a manner that goes beyond formal policy prescriptions. The shift from rote learning to critical and experiential education depends on the active role of teachers, whose training, autonomy, and professional development must be strengthened. Without empowering teachers as key agents of change, pedagogical reforms risk remaining superficial. Furthermore, the integration of vocational education should be approached carefully to ensure that it does not reinforce existing social hierarchies, particularly those linked to caste and labour divisions, but instead contributes to a more inclusive and dignified understanding of work.

Ultimately, the future of NEP 2020 lies in its capacity to move beyond policy intent and engage with the structural inequalities that have historically shaped the Indian education system. If these underlying conditions are meaningfully addressed, the policy holds the potential to contribute to greater social mobility, inclusion, and democratic participation. However, if such challenges persist, there remains a risk that existing inequalities will be reproduced in new forms. Reimagining education, therefore, requires not only policy reform but a broader commitment to social transformation. In this sense, NEP 2020 should be understood as an ongoing and contested project, whose outcomes will be shaped by the continuous interaction between policy, institutions, and society.

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About SLU College

Shree Lalshankar Umiyashankar Arts and Harivadan & Padmaben Thakore Commerce College for Women, which was established in 1920 as an endeavour of Gujarat Stree Kelvani Mandal, has the proud privilege of being the first women's college in Ahmedabad. The college is recognised under Section 2 (f) and 12 (b) of UGC Act 17th June, 1972. The college runs various programmes in affiliation with Gujarat University such as - B.A., B.Com., and M.Com. The BS-BBA programme was added from the academic year 2025-2026. The college also runs several add-on programmes like Fashion Design and Computer Courses at the ICTC centre located at the SLU Campus.

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