



CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NEP 2020 IN ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was introduced by India as a reform that aims at aligning the education system with Sustainable Development Goals. This paper maps the recommendations of NEP 2020 against SDG 4 and SDG 5 targets. It also discusses the theoretical foundations that explain the construction of these guidelines. Findings of the study show that NEP 2020 demonstrates strong conceptual alignment with the SDGs through its focus on foundational learning, equity, teacher training, multilingual education, and 21st century skills. However, there are some implementation challenges such as inadequate infrastructure in rural areas, limited teacher training, lack of finances, and the difficulty of shifting from rote learning to competency-based assessment. This paper concludes that along with the well-designed policy effective implementation, continuous monitoring, and adequate resource allocation are essential to achieve the intended outcomes by 2030.

Key Words: NEP 2020, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched in 2015 by the United Nations. It is a comprehensive framework that consists of 17 goals designed to achieve sustainable development and an equitable future for all by 2030. This 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a holistic perspective by acknowledging the links between social, economic, and environmental factors. Among the goals, education was given special attention, with SDG 4 setting targets for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. This reflects that education is not only a fundamental right but also a key driver for individuals to lead purposeful lives and realize their full potential. In today's world of globalization, the skills required in the workplaces are advanced as compared to the pre-COVID era. The employment sector is changing rapidly by becoming global and inclusive. Artificial intelligence is transforming industries, globalization is bringing nations closer, and technology is reshaping how we live and work. Students now need knowledge and skills that go beyond traditional education. Alongside this, sensitivity towards culture, gender, and minorities is equally important to build a more harmonious world.



India's response to these changing needs came in the form of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy uses SDG 4 from the 2030 Agenda as a blueprint and builds around it to achieve the desired results. Kirmani et al. (2024) state that quality education acts as a catalyst to achieve the educational targets of the SDGs. It addresses the shortcomings of the current education system and presents guidelines to ensure a more qualitative and accessible education system. By putting a lot of emphasis on early childhood education, improved competencies, inclusiveness, and lifelong learning paths, the strategy helps in achieving the SDGs (Nayak, 2026). By embedding the guidelines of NEP 2020, India managed to achieve the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at the elementary level of nearly 100%, indicating near-universal access to primary education (MHRD, 2021). However, challenges regarding learning outcomes, proper use of technology, and educational access still persist.

This paper aims to critically analyze the alignment between guidelines of NEP 2020 with respect to the education goals (SDG 4 and 5), opportunities created by NEP to achieve said goals, and implementation gaps.

Review of the Related Literature

Radha and Arumugam (2023), in their study, noted that NEP 2020 and SDGs have similar objectives, such as making quality education accessible, improving the learning process, and encouraging research. They recommended integrating SDGs into the school curriculum to move the country forward. Through this, students can develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to contribute to sustainable development. Similarly, Tanwar and Yadav (2023) reported that government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan are a positive step towards ensuring no child is left behind in education. Providing the right to education for children (6-14 years of age) is important in achieving the SDGs.

The policy has also introduced reforms to address diversity, skill development, competency-based learning, and environmental awareness. These reforms support several SDGs, including SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 8 (Sharma et al., 2025). Furthermore, by integrating holistic education, skill development, and environmental awareness, the policy aims to lay the foundation for a knowledge-driven society (Pardeshi, 2025). The changes made in NEP 2020, such as the 5+3+3+4 education model, flexible curricula, inclusive education, faculty development, and the use of technology in the classroom, were done to achieve the SDG 4 aims (Nayak, 2026). From the review of these studies, it can be stated that the policy has made notable changes to ensure students can upgrade their skills and live sustainable lives.

Mapping NEP 2020 Recommendations with SDG Goals

With the explicit goal of bringing India's educational system into line with the Sustainable Development Goals, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 made a



number of significant proposals about the governance, structure, and regulations of the current education system. The goal of these recommendations is to bring India's educational system in line with the SDGs, which aims to guarantee inclusive, equitable, high-quality education and encourage lifelong learning for everyone.

This section highlights the extent to which key provisions of the National Education Policy 2020 align with the relevant targets of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5.

Table 1: Mapping the NEP 2020 recommendation with SDGs

NEP 2020 Recommendation	NEP Para/ Section	Relevant SDG and Target	Alignment with SDG
Building the necessary foundational skills (reading, writing, and numeracy) among children for lifelong learning. Redesigning the teacher education curriculum to achieve this goal.	2.1 and 2.4	SDG 4 (Targets 4.1, 4.2, and 4.c)	Foundational skills for quality education and lifelong learning. Focus on teacher preparation.
Providing safe infrastructure, clean toilets, drinking water, electricity, internet, and a library to promote an inclusive learning environment.	Section 5.9	SDG 4 (Target 4.a)	Upgraded infrastructure to ensure a safe and inclusive environment for all.
Forming a 'Gender Inclusion Fund' in order to provide equal opportunities to girls and transgenders.	Section 6.8	SDG 4 (Target 4.5) and SDG 5.	Eliminating gender disparity in education and empowering females.
Inclusion of human values and respect towards other cultures, religions, languages, and gender identities.	Section 6.20	SDG 4 (Target 4.7)	Sustainable development, gender equality, and promoting peace and respect towards cultural diversity.
Free and compulsory education from age 3 onwards.	Section 8.8	SDG 4 (Target 4.1 and 4.2)	Free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education for all children.

Open Distance Learning (ODL) and online programs in higher education institutes to promote lifelong learning	Section 10.10	SDG 4 (Target 4.3)	Affordable technical, vocational education in universities.
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From the above table, it can be seen that the National Education Policy (2020) demonstrates strong conceptual alignment with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 in terms of ensuring quality and equitable education. The policy attempts to put forward comprehensive measures to achieve these goals and to improve and universalize education. However, despite these positive intentions, the fulfillment of these aspirations largely depends on adequate financing, improved infrastructure, addressing equity gaps, and effective implementation. In this context, a theoretical examination becomes essential to understand the underlying principles that is the base of this alignment.

Theoretical Foundation of NEP 2020 and SDGs

From the mapping of NEP recommendations and Sustainable Development Goals, it can be seen that the alignment between them is intentional. The goals (SDG 4 and 5) aim to provide high-quality learning, eliminate gender disparity, use technology in education. The NEP 2020 focused on improving the Indian education system to achieve the SDG 2030 Agenda. The current section of the study builds on this alignment, examining NEP 2020 guidelines and how they relate to the SDG targets. From Table 1, several key themes emerges, which form the basis for the theoretical framework. It further provides deeper understanding of these guidelines by relating educational theories to the goals. These theories help in not only understanding the purpose of policy but also the educational logic behind it and its relevance to human learning.

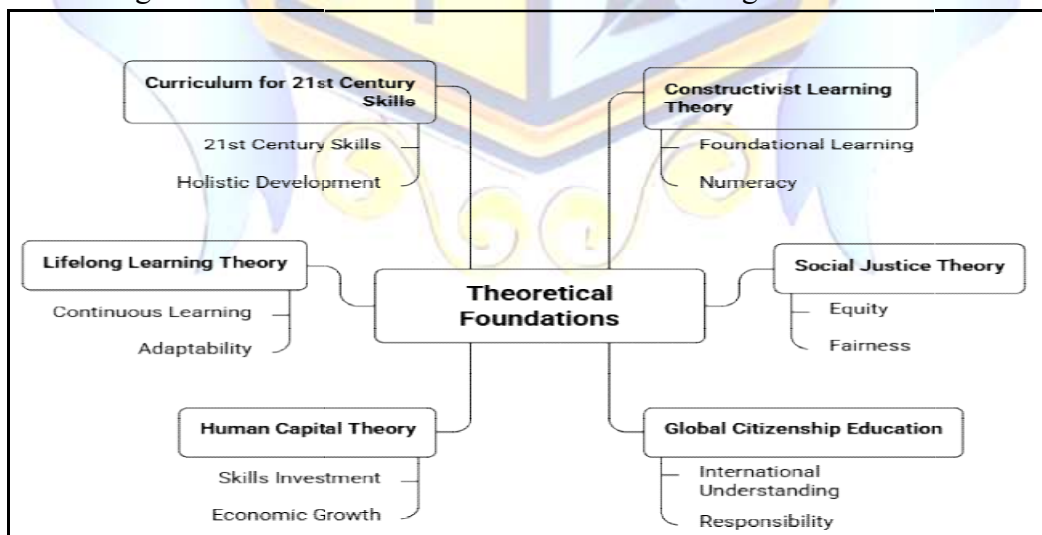


Fig. 1: Theoretical Foundation of NEP 2020



- **Constructivist Learning Theory for Foundational Learning:** The recommendation of NEP 2020 regarding foundational learning is important for building the strong base for lifelong learning. It states that the ability to read, write, and perform basic math is the foundation for early education. To strengthen this view, emphasis is placed on the use of play-based learning, development of multilingual resources, and continuous assessment. SDG 4 targets equal quality education for all, and NEP is advancing it by shifting to the approach of active and experience-based learning. This approach reflects the principle of constructivist learning theory. This theory emphasizes learner-centered instruction, active engagement, and the construction of knowledge through meaningful experiences (Priyamvada, 2018). Furthermore, constructivist learning advocates exploration, inquiry, discussion, and reflection, thus enabling learners to build understanding. Tsulajia (2023) noted that educational systems are increasingly restructuring the curriculum to align with these principles of constructivism.
- **Social Justice Theory in Education:** NEP 2020 proposed a Gender Inclusion Fund to promote equity and inclusion in education. This initiative is based on the principles of social justice theory in education. The policy tries to address the inequalities in education that rise from the differences in gender, socioeconomic status, or minority. This provision directly supports SDG 4.5 and SDG 5 by promoting gender equality and inclusive education. The gender inclusion fund further helps in reducing the barriers faced by transgender students and girls, thus promoting an inclusive learning environment (Rentzi, 2024).
- **Global Citizenship Education:** NEP 2020's emphasis on human values and respect for diverse cultures, religions, languages, and gender identities aligns closely with SDG 4.7, which focuses on education for sustainable development, peace, and global citizenship. This approach draws upon the principles of global citizenship education, which recognizes the growing interconnectedness of individuals across social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. This theory presents education as a powerful tool for developing values such as respect for diversity, empathy, open-mindedness, justice, and fairness, enabling learners to contribute to peaceful and sustainable societies.
- **Human Capital Theory:** The provision of free and compulsory education from the age of 3 onwards under NEP 2020 corresponds with SDG 4.1 and SDG 4.2, which stress equitable access to quality early childhood and school education. This recommendation is based in Human Capital Theory, which views education as a strategic investment in developing individual capabilities. By ensuring early and universal access to education, the policy seeks to build a strong foundation for



lifelong learning, personal development, and long-term social and economic productivity (Gope, 2026).

- **Lifelong Learning Theory:** The promotion of Open Distance Learning (ODL) and online programs in higher education institutions aligns with SDG 4.3, which emphasizes equitable access to affordable technical, vocational, and tertiary education. This initiative is supported by lifelong learning theory, which considers learning as a continuous process that goes on throughout an individual's life. Flexible learning pathways such as ODL enable learners to continuously update their knowledge and skills, thereby supporting ongoing personal, intellectual, and professional development (Kaplan, 2016).
- **Curriculum for 21st Century Skills and Holistic Development:** Furthermore, NEP 2020 advocates curricular and pedagogical reforms by introducing subjects such as artificial intelligence, value education, data analyses, environmental education, and global citizenship education at relevant stages. These initiatives aim to develop critical 21st century skills and promote holistic development among students, thereby strengthening the policy's alignment with the broader goals SDG 4.

Indian higher education institutions can play a meaningful role in preparing students for sustainable development by embedding the Sustainable Development Goals into their curricula and everyday practices thus enabling the development of relevant knowledge, skills, and values (Radha and Arumugam, 2023).

NEP 2020 and Pathways to Sustainable Development

Building on the theoretical foundations discussed in the previous section, NEP 2020 introduces several innovative features aimed at transforming India's education system. This section examines these key innovations and analyzes their potential to advance the targets of SDGs 4 and 5.

1. **Strengthening Foundational Learning:** In order to strengthen the foundational learning and make schooling more accessible, the policy introduced the 5+3+3+4 curriculum structure. To achieve this objective, a key initiative is the NIPUN Bharat Mission. This mission supports age-appropriate learning through culturally relevant learning material, use of technology, and community participation. Furthermore, it also focuses on providing training to the teachers to improve foundational literacy and numeracy (Gupta and Meena, 2024).
2. **Teacher Training:** Teacher training is a major opportunity under NEP 2020 for advancing the SDGs. The policy emphasizes continuous professional development, improved assessment practices, and institutional support to strengthen teaching quality. However, the training will only be effective with the proper monitoring and financial support (Islam, et al., 2026). To ensure quality



- training, NEP 2020 encourages the use of platforms such as SWAYAM and DIKSHA to deliver standardized teacher training to large numbers of teachers in a short period of time (NEP, 15.10; Gupta and Meena, 2024).
- Equity and Inclusion Measures:** NEP 2020 promotes equitable access to education by supporting marginalized groups such as women, SC/ST communities, and differently abled learners through the Gender Inclusion Fund, support for SEDGs, and accessible infrastructure. These measures aim to reduce gender and social disparities while advancing SDG 4.5, SDG 5, and SDG 4. (Pardeshi, 2020).
 - Global Skills:** NEP 2020 introduces subjects such as artificial intelligence, environmental education, GCED, and holistic health to build future-ready skills among learners. This alignment with SDG 4.4 and 4.7 helps in preparing students for the demands of the 21st century and strengthens India's global recognition as a country committed to achieving the SDGs (Radha and Arumugam, 2023).
 - Multilingual Education:** The policy further recommends using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction to achieve the SDG targets 4.1, 4.2, and 4.5. It aims to make education understandable and relevant for everyone. Furthermore, use of technology is encouraged to make teaching and learning easy for different languages (NEP, 4.12).
 - Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems:** The curriculum will focus on integrating traditional and tribal knowledge to ensure the preservation of local culture (NEP, 4.27 and 4.29). This guideline is in line with SDG target 4.7, which focuses on promoting culturally relevant education and respect towards each other's culture.
 - Innovative Pedagogies and Lifelong Learning:** A shift from rote to learner-centric education is proposed by using hands-on learning and story-based learning to achieve SDGs 4.1 and 4.2. Additionally, flexible online and ODL programs should be made available in order to enhance access and lifelong learning (NEP 9.3).

Implementation Challenges and Gaps

The effective implementation of any policy is based not only on its design but also on its proper planning and participation of stakeholders. For this reason, any policy should be designed by keeping in mind the local context, the resources required, and the needs of the people. The success of a policy in one country does not make it applicable in another country. It should be developed keeping the social, economic, and institutional conditions of the country in mind. In the Indian context, the success of NEP 2020 depends on many factors, human and nonhuman. One of the such factors is the infrastructure and financial conditions of the institutions.

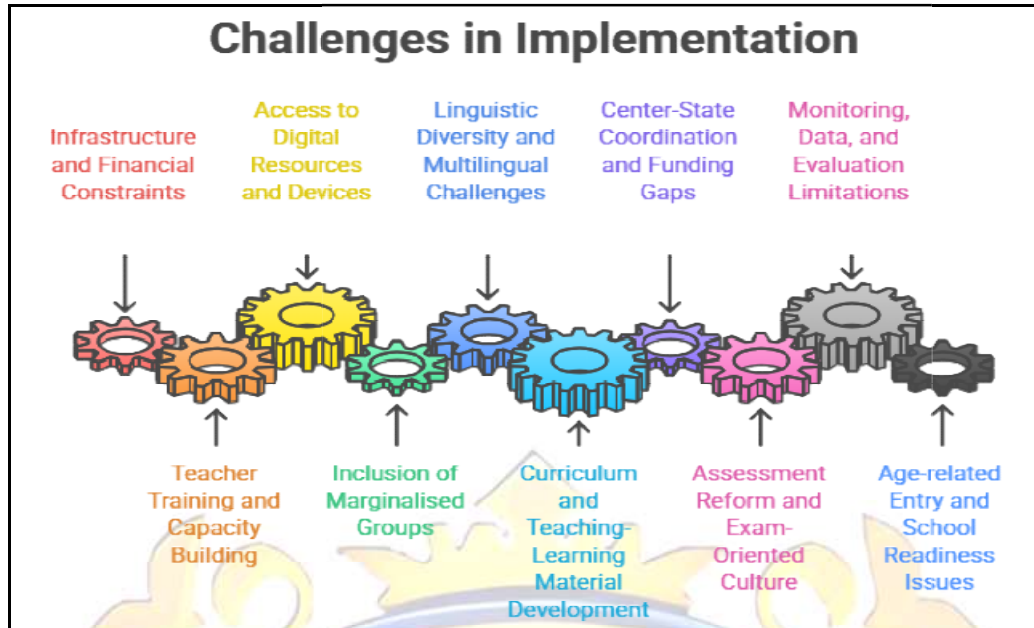


Fig. 2: Challenges in the Implementation of NEP 2020

The government needs to invest heavily in the schools of rural areas in terms of providing electricity, clean bathrooms, uniforms, and books to make education accessible. In addition to this, providing proper training to teachers in terms of technology, artificial intelligence, languages, and cultural knowledge is essential to achieve the targets set by SDG (Sharma et al., 2025). Designing and distributing teaching materials to cover the wide range of disciplines, collaborating with states, and providing funding to educational institutions are required to strengthen the educational systems. Debnatnh (2026) states that the implementation process is made complicated by underrepresented groups, lack of digital devices, and linguistic variety. The shift to competency-based and holistic evaluation through PARAKH also creates a significant implementation challenge, as the Indian education system has revolved around the written exam system for so long. Rote learning fails at equipping students with critical thinking and collaborative skills required of the 21st century. (Kumar, 2021). Preparing teachers for evaluating the critical thinking and competencies and providing hands-on activities requires training, which puts additional pressure on the teachers. Furthermore, the age-related entry in class nursery also presents a challenge on the front of parents being unaware, inconsistent implementation across states, and lack of access to preschool forms.

Discussion

The paper attempts at exploring the goals of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and guidelines of the National Education Policy, 2020. From the mapping section, it can be observed that the recommendations given by NEP are closely related to the SDG targets. This was done to ensure the fulfilment of goals and making students compatible



with the changing world. It is further seen that these recommendations were not formulated randomly but are based on the educational theories that explains the behaviour of children, social justice, gender inclusion and importance of funds in education. These theories support the development of different skills in students to ensure lifelong learning and global skills. Furthermore, the opportunities section identifies the various ways from NIPUN Bharat Mission to use of platforms (SWAYAM & DIKSHA) to strengthen overall learning system. Lastly, it can be seen that even after such efforts a gap between recommendations on paper and their implementation at ground level is present. Weak infrastructure, adequate teacher training, limited financial support, unsupportive stakeholders, shift in evaluation system are just a few factors that hinder the implementation process. These challenges are needed to be addressed with proper planning and support of all stakeholders to achieve the SDGs.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents a significant step towards aligning India's education system with the Sustainable Development Goals. Its attempt to provide inclusive education, teacher training, and use of technology matches with SDG 4 goals. The National Education Policy 2020 marks an important step towards aligning India's education system with the Sustainable Development Goals. Its focus on inclusion, teacher development, and digital resources reflects strong policy intent. However, gaps in implementation at the ground level remain a major concern. Bridging this gap will be crucial for achieving the SDG targets by 2030.

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