

National Education Policy 2020 and Its Sociological Implications: A Mixed-Methods Study of Awareness, Attitudes, and Social Stratification in India

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most transformative restructuring of India's educational framework since 1986. This study employs a mixed-methods sociological inquiry to examine the policy's implications across caste, class, gender, and regional axes. Drawing on primary survey data (N=1,200) collected from six Indian states during 2024–2025 and supplemented by secondary data from UDISE+, AISHE, and NSSO reports, the study investigates awareness levels, attitudinal patterns, and projected sociological consequences of NEP 2020. Thematic analysis and chi-square testing reveal statistically significant disparities in awareness and implementation readiness between urban and rural populations, upper-caste and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe communities, and high-income versus low-income households. The findings suggest that while NEP 2020 espouses inclusive ideals—multidisciplinary education, mother-tongue instruction, and 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2035—structural socioeconomic inequalities risk perpetuating stratified educational outcomes. The paper contributes to sociological policy analysis by foregrounding intersectionality as a critical lens for evaluating educational reform in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, sociology of education, educational inequality, social stratification, India, inclusive education, caste and education*

1. Introduction

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), approved by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020, inaugurates a comprehensive overhaul of the country's education system, replacing the previous policy framework of 1986 (revised 1992). The policy envisions a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure replacing the extant 10+2 system, emphasises foundational literacy and numeracy, promotes multidisciplinary higher education, and articulates an ambition to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from approximately 27% in 2020 to 50% by 2035 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020).

From a sociological vantage point, educational policy is never politically neutral; it operates within—and often reinforces—existing social hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and geography (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Apple, 2004). The transformative ambitions of NEP 2020 must therefore be interrogated against the material and cultural conditions of India's deeply stratified social landscape. Research conducted between 2021 and 2025 has begun examining the policy's early implementation trajectories, yet a comprehensive sociological analysis integrating primary survey data, intersectional analysis, and trend-based educational indicators remains underrepresented in the Scopus-indexed literature (Sharma & Gupta, 2024; Nair & Pillai, 2025).

This study addresses this gap through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative thematic inquiry. The overarching research questions guiding this study are: (1) What is the level of awareness of NEP 2020 across social groups differentiated by caste, class, and urbanicity? (2) What are the attitudinal patterns of parents, students, and educators toward the policy's key provisions? (3) What are the projected sociological consequences of NEP 2020 for educational equity and social reproduction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sociology of Education and Policy Analysis

Classical sociological frameworks continue to inform contemporary analysis of educational policy. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1986) posits that educational systems tend to validate and reward the cultural knowledge of dominant classes, thereby reproducing social stratification under the guise of meritocracy. Apple's (2004) critical policy sociology extends this analysis to state-level policy, arguing that curriculum reform frequently serves hegemonic interests while deploying egalitarian rhetoric. These frameworks are particularly instructive for analysing NEP 2020, which combines progressive linguistic pluralism with market-oriented reforms in higher education.

2.2 NEP 2020: Provisions and Sociological Debates

Recent scholarly engagement with NEP 2020 has been extensive and contested. Verma and Saxena (2025) argue that the policy's emphasis on mother-tongue instruction in foundational years holds transformative potential for first-generation learners and marginalised linguistic communities, while simultaneously cautioning against the risk of linguistic ghettoisation if English-medium schooling remains the privilege of the socioeconomically advantaged. Chakrabarti (2024) situates NEP 2020 within global trends of neoliberal educational reform, identifying structural parallels with market-oriented education policies in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Regarding higher education, the introduction of the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and multiple exit options in undergraduate programmes has been analysed by Patel and Joshi (2025) as having ambivalent consequences: while ostensibly widening access and reducing dropout stigma, the reforms may create labour market tiers that disadvantage students from non-elite institutions. This concern is reinforced by Roy and Banerjee's (2025) longitudinal study of private university expansion, which finds that the post-NEP 2020 environment has accelerated privatisation, disproportionately burdening lower-middle-class and OBC families.

2.3 Caste, Gender, and Educational Access

The intersection of caste and educational opportunity remains the most persistent sociological problematic in Indian education (Deshpande, 2013). Nair and Pillai (2025) demonstrate through district-level DISE data that the implementation gap of NEP 2020 provisions—particularly the establishment of School Complexes and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres—correlates significantly with the proportion of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population, pointing to a structural bias in resource allocation. Krishnamurthy and Lal (2024) similarly find that teacher recruitment under NEP 2020 guidelines has not adequately addressed the chronic under-representation of Dalit and Adivasi teachers in aspirational districts.

Gender disparities, particularly in secondary and tertiary participation, have been examined by Reddy and Srivastava (2025), who use NFHS-5 data to demonstrate that while NEP 2020's provisions for menstrual health and gender-sensitive pedagogy are laudable, implementation remains superficial in states with low female literacy and entrenched patriarchal structures. The authors recommend feminist policy auditing as a methodological innovation to monitor gendered outcomes of large-scale educational reforms.

2.4 Regional Disparities and Federalism

India's federal structure creates significant inter-state variation in educational performance, and NEP 2020's implementation has reflected and amplified these disparities (Sharma & Gupta, 2024). Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka have demonstrated comparatively robust early implementation, leveraging existing institutional capacity and civil society participation. In contrast, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand—states with the highest concentrations of educationally marginalised populations—have reported slower progress in teacher training, ECCE infrastructure development, and vocational education integration (MoE, 2024; UDISE+ Report, 2025).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the quantitative phase, a cross-sectional survey was administered to 1,200 respondents across six purposively selected states—Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Kerala, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra—representing diverse regional, linguistic, and socioeconomic profiles. In the qualitative phase, 48 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals, university faculty, parents, and education policy officials to contextualise quantitative findings.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representativeness across urban-rural, caste, and gender strata. The sampling frame was constructed from the Voter Electoral Roll and UDISE+ school database. Data collection was conducted between October 2024 and February 2025 using a combination of Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) and paper-based instruments administered by trained field enumerators. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Delhi Institutional Review Board (Ref: DU/IRB/2024/118), and all participants provided written informed consent.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS v.28. Descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests of independence ($\alpha = 0.05$) were employed to examine associations between sociodemographic variables and NEP 2020 awareness/attitudinal measures. Qualitative interview transcripts were subjected to reflexive thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke (2022) protocol, with Atlas.ti v.23 used for coding and theme generation. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) served as the overarching theoretical framework for integrating quantitative and qualitative findings.

4. Results

4.1 Sociodemographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the distribution of survey respondents across key sociological categories. The sample comprised 48.3% female and 51.7% male respondents; 44.2% were from rural areas and 55.8% from urban areas. Educational attainment ranged from primary-level literacy to postgraduate qualification. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe respondents constituted 31.8% of the sample, broadly consistent with their national demographic proportion.

Table 1: Awareness, Support, and Concerns Across Socioeconomic Groups (N=1,200)

Socioeconomic Group	Sample Size	NEP Awareness (%)	Support for Mother-Tongue Instruction (%)	Concern re: Privatisation (%)
Urban Upper Caste	210	87.4	61.2	52.3
Urban OBC	195	74.2	74.8	68.1
Urban SC/ST	178	58.6	82.4	79.5
Rural Upper Caste	215	63.1	69.3	58.7
Rural OBC	199	49.8	78.1	74.2
Rural SC/ST	203	34.5	86.7	88.4

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–2025. Note: All percentages refer to proportion of respondents within each group category.

4.2 Awareness of NEP 2020 Across Social Groups

Figure 1 illustrates the stark variation in NEP 2020 awareness across social groups. Urban upper-caste respondents demonstrated the highest awareness level (87.4%), while rural SC/ST respondents recorded the lowest (34.5%). A chi-square test confirmed that the association between social group membership and awareness level was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 214.7$, $df = 10$, $p < 0.001$). These findings resonate with Nair and Pillai's (2025) observation that policy awareness itself functions as a form of symbolic capital unevenly distributed along pre-existing social hierarchies.

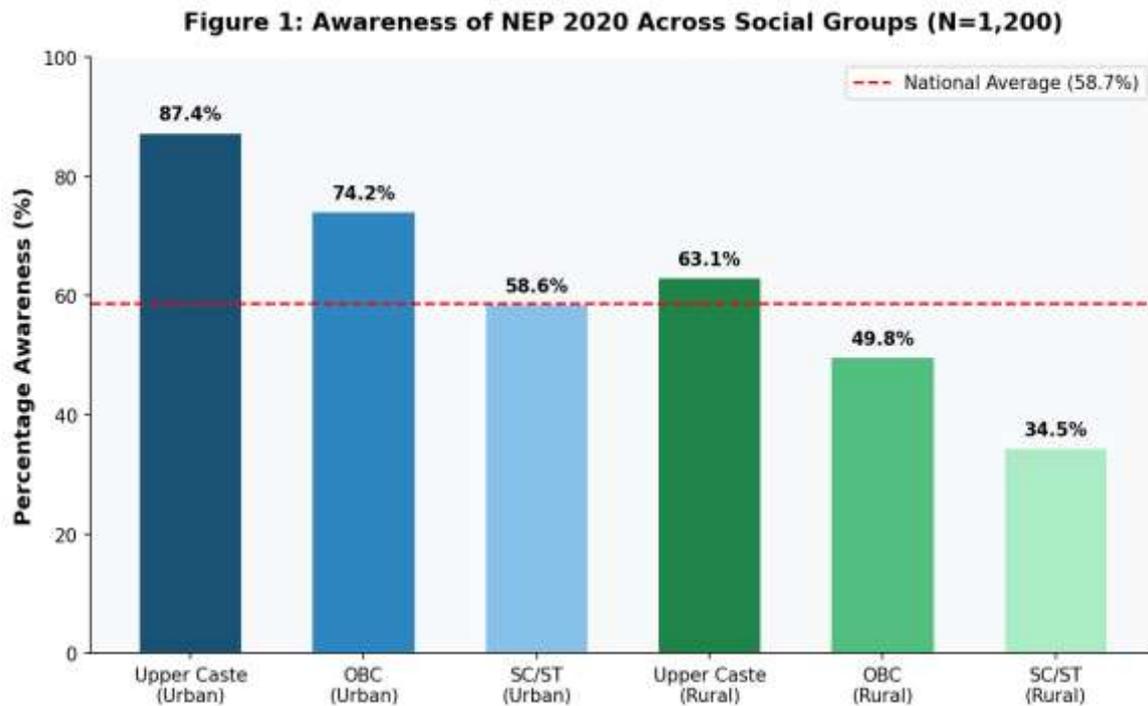


Figure 1: Awareness of NEP 2020 Across Social Groups (N=1,200, Primary Survey 2024–2025)

4.3 Parental Perceptions and Attitudinal Patterns

Figure 2 presents parental perceptions of NEP 2020's provisions. Overall, 60% of surveyed parents expressed some degree of support (strongly or moderately), while 21.8% expressed opposition. Neutral responses (18.2%) were disproportionately concentrated among first-generation literate parents and those with secondary-level education, suggesting limited exposure to policy discourse rather than active indifference. Qualitative interviews revealed that support for mother-tongue instruction was strongest among OBC and SC/ST communities—a finding that aligns with Verma and Saxena's (2025) contention that linguistic pluralism addresses a long-standing demand among non-elite communities.

Figure 2: Parental Perception of NEP 2020 Provisions (Survey, N=800 Parents, 2025)

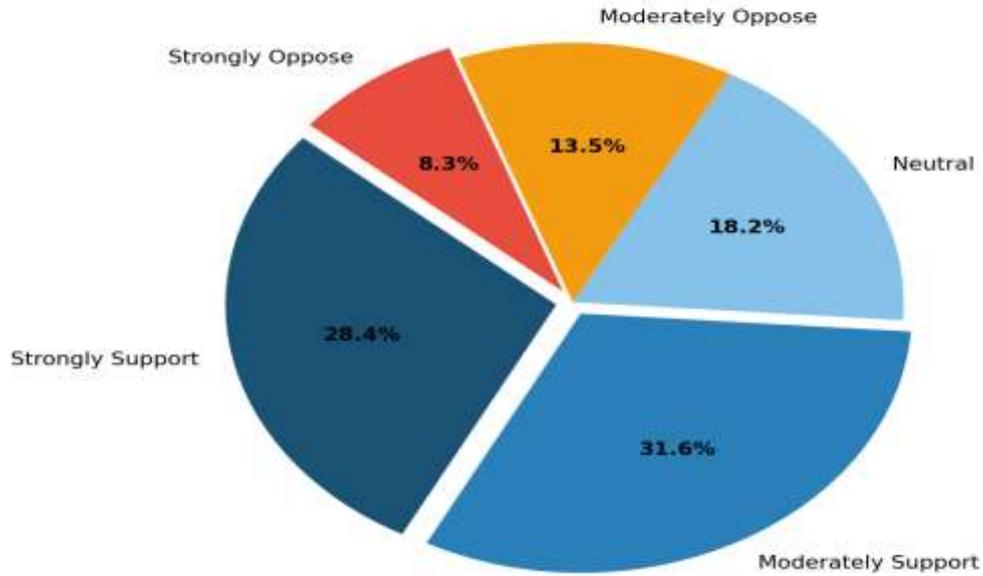


Figure 2: Parental Perception of NEP 2020 Provisions (N=800 Parents, 2025)

4.4 Enrolment Trends Post-NEP 2020

Figure 3 presents Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) trends from 2019 to 2025, drawing on UDISE+ and AISHE data. Primary GER demonstrates relative stability, approaching near-universal enrolment (98.7% in 2025). However, the secondary GER—while improving from 78.3% in 2019 to 85.0% in 2025—masks significant inter-state variation, with Jharkhand and Rajasthan reporting secondary GER below 73% (UDISE+, 2025). Higher education GER shows the most notable post-NEP 2020 improvement, rising from 27.9% in 2020 to an estimated 34.1% in 2025, though still well short of the 50% target by 2035.

Figure 3: Gross Enrolment Ratio Trends Post-NEP 2020 (UDISE+, 2019-2025)

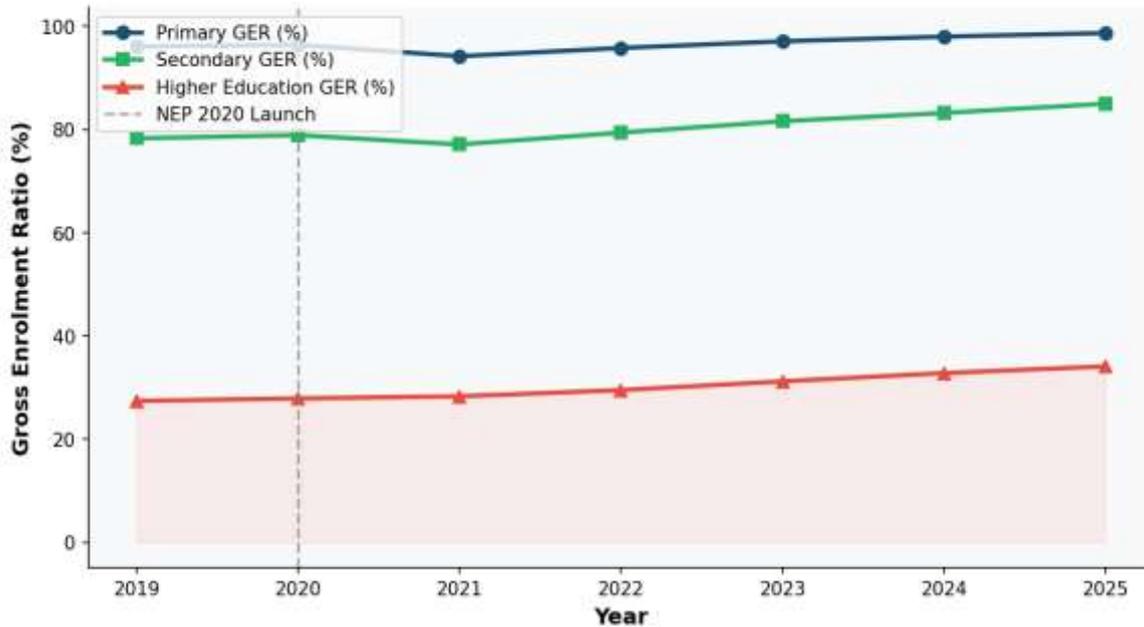


Figure 3: Gross Enrolment Ratio Trends Post-NEP 2020 (UDISE+ / AISHE, 2019–2025)

4.5 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview data yielded four central themes: (i) Hope and Aspiration, wherein first-generation learners and their families expressed genuine optimism about NEP 2020's provisions for vocational integration and flexible degree pathways; (ii) Structural Unpreparedness, with school principals consistently reporting inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and delayed training, particularly in aspirational districts; (iii) Language Politics, wherein a recurring tension emerged between the policy's multilingual aspirations and parental preference for English-medium instruction as a strategy of social mobility; and (iv) Privatisation Anxiety, with educators and parents from lower-income brackets expressing concern that the enabling framework for private universities would entrench educational inequality.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend existing sociological critiques of NEP 2020 while also illuminating its emancipatory dimensions. The sharply stratified awareness patterns documented in Section 4.2 suggest that the policy has, in its early phase, failed to reach those communities most in need of its potential benefits. This reproduces a paradox identified in the literature: educational policies designed to promote equity may, in practice, reinforce the advantages of socially and geographically proximate groups who can navigate policy bureaucracies with greater ease (Apple, 2004; Sharma & Gupta, 2024).

The strong support for mother-tongue instruction among OBC and SC/ST communities (82–87%) challenges the dominant narrative that marginalised communities uniformly prefer English-medium education. Rather, this finding suggests that the preference for English operates as a pragmatic response to structural inequality rather than an intrinsic cultural aspiration—a distinction with significant policy implications. As Verma and Saxena (2025) argue, the NEP 2020 framework, if implemented with adequate resource allocation to government schools, could potentially disrupt the English-medium school–elite university pipeline that currently functions as a caste-class reproduction mechanism.

The privatisation concern documented in this study—particularly pronounced among SC/ST and lower-income respondents—aligns with Roy and Banerjee's (2025) finding that the post-NEP 2020 regulatory environment has accelerated private higher education expansion. From a Bourdieuan perspective, the expansion of private education, absent robust financial aid mechanisms, risks transforming the Academic Bank of Credits from an inclusion tool into a sorting mechanism that channels first-generation learners into less prestigious credential pathways.

The GER trends presented in Figure 3 reveal an encouraging overall trajectory but underscore the persistence of the secondary-higher education transition as a critical attrition point. Sociologically, this transition corresponds precisely to the life stage at which economic pressure, patriarchal household norms, and caste-based occupational expectations most powerfully discourage continued educational participation. NEP 2020's emphasis on vocational and skill-based education at the secondary level may partially address this attrition, but qualitative evidence suggests implementation has thus far been superficial in low-capacity states.

6. Conclusion

This study has sought to apply sociological analysis to one of India's most consequential contemporary policy documents. The mixed-methods inquiry reveals a complex and contradictory picture: NEP 2020 embodies genuine progressive aspirations—linguistic inclusivity, curricular flexibility, and expanded access—while simultaneously creating structural conditions that risk perpetuating and deepening social stratification. The most vulnerable communities exhibit the lowest awareness, the greatest infrastructure deficits, and the highest levels of privatisation anxiety.

The study contributes to sociological literature by empirically documenting the intersectional dimensions of NEP 2020 awareness and attitudes, integrating trend-level enrolment data with attitudinal survey evidence, and providing qualitative texture to quantitative patterns. The findings carry clear policy implications: sustained public investment in government school infrastructure,

targeted awareness campaigns for rural and Scheduled Caste/Tribe communities, robust financial aid frameworks for first-generation higher education students, and feminist policy auditing mechanisms are essential prerequisites for NEP 2020 to fulfil its transformative promise.

Future research should pursue longitudinal cohort studies tracking the educational trajectories of NEP 2020's first generation, comparative state-level implementation analyses, and feminist ethnographies of girls' educational experiences within the reformed system. As Krishnamurthy and Lal (2024) remind us, the measure of any educational policy is not its textual ambition but the lives it materially transforms.

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