

NEP 2020 and Its Implications for Muslim Women's Higher Education in India: Gaps, Opportunities, and the Way Forward

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Abstract- *A revolutionary vision for India's educational system, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to advance excellence, equity, and inclusivity. However, rigorous examination is necessary to determine its consequences for historically oppressed populations, especially Muslim women. Using existing literature, policy documents, and educational reports, this research analyses the benefits and drawbacks of NEP 2020 with regard to Muslim women's empowerment and access to higher education in India. Although the strategy places a strong emphasis on gender equality, holistic development, and the participation of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), it does not specifically address the structural and sociocultural obstacles that Muslim women face. The study points out gaps include the lack of targeted financial help, the lack of affirmative action policies for religious minorities, and the silence surrounding intersectional marginalities. At the same time, it examines how NEP 2020 might empower Muslim women through community-sensitive implementation of its potential benefits, including digital learning, flexible entry-exit in higher education, and bilingual education. In order to guarantee that NEP's goal is translated into fair educational outcomes for Muslim women, the report ends with suggestions for the implementation of inclusive policies as well as requests for additional study and community-based initiatives.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, historical neglect and systemic obstacles have long plagued Muslim women's involvement in higher education. Their educational path has been influenced by multiple forms of exclusion, even though the constitution guarantees equal opportunity. The Gross

Enrollment Ratio (GER) for Muslim women is around 15%, which is much lower than the national average of 27.3% for women in all communities, according to data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21. This underrepresentation is a sign of larger institutional and socioeconomic inequalities rather than a singular result.

It is evident from the Sachar Committee Report (2006), which was commissioned to evaluate the socioeconomic and educational standing of Muslims in India, that Muslims, particularly Muslim women, do poorly on important educational metrics. It emphasized how a number of issues, including societal discrimination, residential segregation, poverty, and insufficient public provisioning, block Muslim women's access to education. According to UDISE+ data, Muslim-majority areas frequently have inadequate school facilities and a shortage of secondary and higher secondary institutions, which deters girls from pursuing higher education. Similarly, Muslim women's access to higher education is hindered by financial difficulties, early marriage, and limited mobility, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, according to NSSO statistics. These obstacles need to be viewed from an intersectional perspective, where Muslim women's disadvantages are compounded by the interaction of gender, religion, and socioeconomic class. Although the Indian government has taken a number of steps to help Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), religious minorities—Muslim women in particular—frequently get left behind by general affirmative action policies that ignore their unique vulnerabilities.

Given this complicated environment, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was unveiled with the goal of modernizing the Indian educational system to

make it more egalitarian, inclusive, and prepared for the future. The policy aims to provide flexible learning pathways, encourage transdisciplinary learning, and raise the higher education gross enrollment ratio to 50% by 2035. NEP 2020 has been criticized for its lack of specific provisions for religious minorities, possible over-reliance on digital learning, and risks of increased privatization—factors that could further marginalize already marginalized groups, particularly Muslim women—even though it represents a shift in the conversation around education.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, in this regard, positions itself as a revolutionary framework that seeks to restructure the Indian educational system. With its declared focus on flexibility, equity, and inclusion, NEP 2020 presents chances to close long-standing gaps in education. However, it has also come under fire for the possible dangers of digital divides and privatization, as well as for its lack of specificity in addressing the concerns of religious minorities, especially Muslim women.

Thus, the purpose of this essay is to critically examine:

- How much does NEP 2020 address Muslim women's systemic exclusion from Indian higher education?
- What are the main policy flaws that could keep preventing equity and access?
- Which NEP 2020 chances might be used to help Muslim women achieve better results in higher education?

By tackling these issues, the study hopes to support focused solutions that acknowledge the particular difficulties encountered by Muslim women in India's higher education system and add to the expanding conversation on inclusive education policy.

II. METHODOLOGY

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is critically examined in this study using a qualitative policy analysis approach, with a focus on Muslim women's access to higher education in India. The main focus is on a textual analysis of NEP 2020, evaluating the policy's wording, clauses, and silences in relation to fairness, inclusion, and the representation of religious minorities.

The study uses a variety of secondary data sources to contextualize and bolster the findings, such as:

- According to data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Muslim women's enrolment trends
- statistics from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) on socioeconomic factors, income, and education,
- data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to evaluate more general sociopolitical safety and mobility issues,
- To comprehend the policy environment, consult reports from the National Commission for Minorities and other governmental organizations.
- Information about minority students' access to government fellowships and scholarships.

In order to contextualize the critical conversation on educational equity, contemporary scholarly works and think tank publications are also examined when appropriate.

By providing an intersectional and fact-based critique of NEP 2020, the technique seeks to close the gap between policy text and social reality, paying particular focus to Muslim women's involvement in higher education.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Both colonial and post-colonial sociopolitical systems have a significant role in Muslim women's educational marginalization in India. In the 19th century, reformers such as Fatima Sheikh, one of the first Muslim women educators in India, established the groundwork for inclusive education. Nevertheless, their contributions have been generally ignored in popular discourse, which is indicative of Muslim women's lack of visibility in educational narratives.

The Sachar Committee Report (2006), which exposed the extreme economic and educational disadvantages of Indian Muslims, is still a crucial document. It pointed out that systemic neglect by state institutions and community patriarchy exacerbate the marginalization of Muslim women. Extending this study, Zoya Hasan contends that despite being one of the most socio-educationally disadvantaged groups, Muslim women are nevertheless denied the

advantages of affirmative action because there are no reservations based on religion. The Indian state's involvement in sustaining inequality through supposedly neutral policies that disregard intersectional identities is further questioned by Martha Nussbaum and Nivedita Menon.

Scholars have repeatedly criticized the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 for its vague commitment to inclusivity. Although the policy purports to advance equity, Anita Rampal points out that it does not provide explicit procedures for attending to the needs of underrepresented groups, particularly religious minorities. Krishna Kumar cautions that NEP's support of digital education and privatization runs the risk of widening already-existing gaps, especially for pupils from low-income families without access to the internet.

Muslim women's educational exclusion cannot be analyzed from a single angle, according to scholarly discussions on gender and minority rights in Indian education. It must take into account how class, gender, and religion interact. National policy frameworks frequently ignore this intersectionality, which leads to insufficient solutions for their particular problems.

The significance of inclusive education, which addresses structural barriers, cultural relevance, and equitable outcomes in addition to formal access, is emphasized by contemporary educational thought. This conversation revolves around the difference between equity and equality: equity acknowledges and supports students' unique needs, whereas equality treats all pupils equally. However, NEP 2020 tends to focus more on a standardized, "meritocratic" approach to education, frequently ignoring the structural barriers that keep Muslim women from competing on an equal basis.

All things considered, the literature emphasizes the necessity of gender-just, faith-sensitive educational policies that acknowledge the distinct positionality of Muslim women and go beyond tokenistic inclusion in the direction of transformative justice.

NEP 2020: A Policy Overview

After more than thirty years, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a thorough overhaul of

India's educational system. With a fundamental focus on equality, inclusivity, multidisciplinary, and skill-building to prepare students for the economy of the twenty-first century, it seeks to establish a more comprehensive, adaptable, and learner-centred approach.

One of its noteworthy objectives is to raise the higher education Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035, which would greatly boost access for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to increase educational reach, the policy places a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary institutions, flexible entry-exit choices, vocational education integration, and the promotion of online learning and digital learning.

NEP 2020 provides a number of tools to assist underprivileged communities, including:

- The establishment of a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to finance programs aimed at reducing educational disparities between genders.
- The Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), which comprise SCs, STs, OBCs, people with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged segments, are given particular attention.
- The Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) is being suggested to be established in order to control and guarantee fairness, access, and quality standards in higher education.

A careful examination of NEP 2020, however, identifies a significant omission: religious minorities, particularly Muslims, are not specifically identified as a marginalized or vulnerable population in need of focused assistance. Despite the Muslims demonstrated socioeconomic and educational backwardness (as noted by the Sachar Committee), the SEDGs' general use does not specifically acknowledge them, which is a major policy design flaw. This broad framing runs the risk of obscuring the particular difficulties Muslim women encounter, including institutional neglect, residential segregation, and discrimination within the community.

In summary, NEP 2020 promotes a progressive

agenda in many ways, but its ability to really attain inclusive and equitable educational outcomes for all may be constrained by its reliance on broad categories and silences regarding religious minority.

Gaps in NEP 2020 from a Muslim Women's Perspectives:

Notwithstanding its claims to be progressive and transformational, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 does not adequately address the complex and particular obstacles Muslim women confront when trying to pursue higher education. When examined more closely, a number of significant discrepancies become apparent when considering religion, gender, and socioeconomic marginality:

1. **Lack of Specific Recognition for Muslims as a Disadvantaged Group:** Unlike other backward classes (OBCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Scheduled Castes (SCs), Muslims are not specifically identified in NEP 2020 as a socio-educationally disadvantaged group. Given the thorough documentation of their backwardness in papers like the Sachar Committee Report (2006) and later government data, this omission is especially glaring. Without this acknowledgment, the policy framework does not include targeted interventions for the Muslim community, particularly for women.
2. **Gender Inclusion Funds (GIF) Lacks Religious Targeting:** The Gender Inclusion Fund lacks a community-sensitive strategy, despite being a praiseworthy start in tackling gender-based inequities. Muslim females, who encounter particular difficulties such as early marriage pressures, socioreligious discrimination, and cultural mobility constraints, are not specifically supported. A homogeneous gender perspective runs the risk of ignoring how gender intersects with class and religion.
3. **Dismantling of UGC and other Regulatory Bodies:** There are issues with minority representation and regulatory accountability raised by the plan to establish a centralized Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) in place of current organizations like the University Grants Commission (UGC). Despite these flaws, these universities

already established programs and awards (such as the Maulana Azad Fellowship) that helped underrepresented students. Removing them without strong substitutes could upset the current networks of support for Muslim women.

4. **Threat to public Funded Institutions:** Through a greater dependence on digital platforms and self-financing institutions, NEP 2020 promotes market-driven and privatized educational models. Publicly supported colleges and universities, which have traditionally provided lifelines for students from underprivileged backgrounds, run the risk of being undermined by such a change. Muslim women may find it more and more difficult to purchase or obtain high-quality private education because they frequently originate from low-income families.
5. **Neglect of Traditional Islamic Institutions:** There is no specific plan for upgrading or integrating madarasas into the larger higher education system; the strategy only mentions them in passing. Since a sizable portion of Muslim youth, particularly females in conservative environments, attend madarasas, their exclusion represents a lost chance for inclusive reform and closing the divide between mainstream and traditional schooling.
6. **No Affirmative Acknowledgment of Intersectional Barriers:** Above all, a thorough intersectional strategy is absent from NEP 2020. It ignores the ways in which regional location, economic hardship, and religious identity interact with gender-based restrictions, especially for Muslim women. The policy runs the risk of sustaining the very exclusions it aims to eradicate if it ignores this intersectionality.

Opportunities and Enablers in NEP 2020

Notwithstanding its obvious shortcomings, NEP 2020 also presents a number of structural opportunities that, if applied with an inclusive and community-sensitive perspective, might be used to enhance Muslim women's access to and performance in higher education. Despite not being specifically targeted,

these enablers have the ability to overcome past obstacles provided they are backed by strong policy intent and cooperation with stakeholders who are focused on minorities.

1. Flexibility in Subject Choices and Entry-Exit Option: With the introduction of numerous entry and departure points in higher education brought about by NEP 2020, students can earn degrees, certificates, or diplomas depending on how long they study. Muslim women, who frequently experience educational delays as a result of marriage, financial strains, or childcare obligations, could especially benefit from this flexible approach. A second-chance approach for lifelong learning is provided by the freedom to reenter the system without incurring penalties.
2. Promotion of Regional Languages and Local Contexts: The strategy places a strong emphasis on teaching mother tongue and regional languages, particularly when it comes to the delivery of content in early childhood education and higher education. This could improve understanding, confidence, and retention for a large number of Muslim students, particularly first-generation students from underprivileged areas. Minority students who might find it difficult to learn in Hindi or English could find higher education more accessible if this emphasis on linguistic inclusion is properly crafted.
3. Multidisciplinary Institutions and Under Reserved Areas: With an emphasis on greater accessibility and institutional density, NEP 2020 aims to establish multifunctional institutions in underserved and rural areas. If properly executed, this could help Muslim women in undereducated areas, where the absence of local universities continues to be a significant barrier to pursuing higher education. Localized and decentralized centres for higher education could ease families' and communities' worries about mobility.
4. Scope for Collaboration with Minority-Focused Institutions: Although it isn't

specifically covered in the policy, there is room to match NEP objectives with minority welfare organizations that are already in place, like the Maulana Azad Education Foundation, State Waqf Boards, and non-governmental organizations involved in education. These organizations can play a vital role in raising awareness, distributing scholarships, engaging the community, and closing policy-practice gaps for Muslim women's higher education with specially designed programs and collaborations.

5. Digital Learning Infrastructure (if made Equitable): Even while the digital divide may provide a challenge, the trend toward online and digital learning also presents opportunity for homemakers and distant learners if access is made equal. If community-level digital infrastructure and training are made available, online certificates, open universities, and blended learning could be inclusive platforms for Muslim women who confront cultural or mobility constraints.

In conclusion, NEP 2020's structural reforms provide enabling spaces that can be utilized through targeted implementation, inclusive pedagogy, and strategic cooperation with minority-serving groups, even though it may not specifically target Muslim women. Political will, tailored policies, and ongoing community involvement are necessary to realize this promise.

CONCLUSION

With a focus on adaptability, equity, and holistic learning, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a forward-thinking plan for revamping India's educational system. The policy is a mixed bag, nevertheless, as it is mute on many structural factors that determine educational exclusion yet having an ambitious scope when examined through the perspective of Muslim women's involvement in higher education.

NEP 2020 ignores a crucial population that still faces multifaceted marginalization because of their religion, gender, and socioeconomic status by not specifically identifying Muslims as a socio-educationally disadvantaged group. If complementing measures are

not taken, the lack of focused processes, increasing privatization, and the weakening of regulatory agencies could unintentionally exacerbate already-existing disparities.

However, if applied with an inclusive, intersectional, and community-sensitive approach, the policy's emphasis on adaptability, local contexts, and multidisciplinary access presents opportunities that can be capitalized on. To guarantee that these opportunities result in tangible and quantifiable change for Muslim women, cooperation with minority-focused organizations, digital inclusion initiatives, and fair public investment are crucial.

In the end, a truly inclusive educational system needs to actively address intersectional exclusions and go beyond universalistic principles. It is not a question of political compromise to acknowledge the unique obstacles Muslim women confront; rather, it is a moral and constitutional requirement for creating a just and democratic society.

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