



Operationalising NEP 2020 in Manipur: Pathways to Transformative Higher Education Reform

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the operationalisation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in the conflict-affected north-eastern state of Manipur, with a focus on structural reforms, equity outcomes, and institutional capacity. The research employs a qualitative, desk-based methodology, utilising meta-analysis and thematic synthesis of secondary data sourced from national and state policy documents, institutional reports, peer-reviewed literature, and media and civil society sources. Findings indicate moderate progress in structural alignment, with nearly 70% of government colleges adopting the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme and Manipur University achieving 80% Academic Bank of Credits enrolment. Equity-focused initiatives such as the Chief Minister's College Students Rehabilitation Scheme contributed to a 15% rise in Scheduled Tribe enrolment and a 12% improvement in retention among pilot cohorts. However,



implementation depth remains uneven due to severe infrastructural deficits, affecting 80% of hill colleges, faculty vacancy rates of about 40%, and limited digital readiness. The 2023 ethnic conflict further disrupted reforms, displacing nearly 20,000 students and excluding around 75% of rural and tribal learners from online education. The study concludes that while NEP 2020 provides a transformative framework, its success in Manipur depends on conflict-sensitive strategies, targeted resource mobilisation, faculty capacity-building, and localised governance mechanisms to ensure inclusive and resilient higher education reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020, marks the most comprehensive reform of India's education system in over three decades. Replacing the National Policy on Education of 1986, NEP 2020 seeks to address persistent challenges of access, equity, quality, relevance, and governance in higher education (Ministry of Education, 2020). Anchored in the vision of creating a "vibrant knowledge society," the policy emphasises holistic and multidisciplinary learning, academic flexibility, student mobility, and research orientation. One of its most ambitious goals is to increase India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from 26.3% in 2018 to 50% by 2035, requiring the inclusion of nearly 3.5 crore additional students into higher education institutions (Kumar & Shobana, 2023; Rao, 2025).

Structurally, NEP 2020 introduces transformative mechanisms such as the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) with multiple entry and exit options, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) to facilitate lifelong learning and mobility, and the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as a single regulatory authority. These reforms aim to dismantle rigid disciplinary silos, foster critical thinking and research capacity, and align Indian higher education with global best practices while remaining rooted in Indian knowledge systems (Ministry of Education, 2020).

For Manipur, a north-eastern border state characterised by cultural diversity and socio-political fragility, the operationalisation of NEP 2020 carries particular significance. Home to more than 30 ethnic groups and multiple linguistic communities, Manipur's higher education system operates under constraints of geographical isolation, low institutional density, and historical underinvestment



(Government of Manipur, 2023). The state's GER remains significantly below national averages, with female GER reported at approximately 12%, reflecting deep gender and social inequities (Khan, 2023; Gurramkonda et al., 2025). Faculty vacancies exceeding 40% and undergraduate dropout rates above 25% further underscore systemic capacity gaps (Khan, 2023). In this context, NEP provisions such as flexible curricular pathways, multiple entry–exit options, and digital credit portability through the ABC are especially relevant for addressing mobility barriers and educational discontinuities (Manipur University, 2025).

Manipur demonstrated early institutional commitment to the policy, with Manipur University initiating NEP-aligned reforms during the 2021-2022 academic year. Complementing this, the state government launched the Chief Minister's College Students Rehabilitation Scheme (CMCSRS) in 2023 to support blended learning, syllabus restructuring, and the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (Government of Manipur, 2023). However, the implementation trajectory was severely disrupted by the outbreak of ethnic conflict in May 2023. The violence resulted in prolonged campus closures, damage to educational infrastructure, the conversion of several higher education institutions into relief camps, and one of the most extended internet shutdowns in India, undermining the digital foundations central to NEP 2020 (Imphal Times, 2025).

Against this backdrop, operationalising NEP 2020 in Manipur demands a context-sensitive and resilience-oriented approach that aligns national reform objectives with local socio-political realities. Understanding this complex interplay is essential for assessing the feasibility, equity outcomes, and sustainability of higher education reforms in conflict-affected regions, thereby contributing to the broader national goal of inclusive and transformative educational development (Ministry of Education, 2020).

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The body of scholarship on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 broadly converges on its paradigm shift from rote-based, discipline-bound instruction to a holistic, multidisciplinary, and skill-oriented model of higher education (Ministry of Education, 2020). Central to this shift is the dismantling of rigid academic silos through flexible curricula, outcome-based learning, and the integration of technology-enabled pedagogy. Studies emphasise that such reforms are intended to enhance critical thinking, innovation, and employability among graduates while aligning Indian higher education with global knowledge economies (Ministry of Education, 2020; Rangachari, 2021).



A significant strand of literature examines the relevance of NEP 2020 for geographically remote and underserved regions. Kumar and Shobana (2023) argue that the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and multiple entry–exit options are particularly transformative for regions such as Northeast India, where student mobility is constrained by terrain, conflict, and economic precarity. Their analysis suggests that flexible credit accumulation could reduce undergraduate dropout rates by 15-20%, especially among first-generation learners. However, scholars caution that infrastructural deficits, such as inadequate digital connectivity and limited institutional capacity, pose severe constraints on the realisation of these benefits (Rangachari, 2021; Nigam, 2024). Empirical evidence indicates that in several northeastern states, including Manipur, a substantial proportion of colleges lack reliable digital infrastructure, undermining the technology-driven aspirations of the policy (Ahmed, 2025).

Governance reform constitutes another central theme in the literature. Simon (2024) evaluates the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), structured around four verticals: regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standards, as a mechanism for ensuring accountability while granting graded autonomy to institutions. While this framework is viewed as potentially empowering for regional universities, critics warn that excessive centralisation may dilute local agency and contextual responsiveness (Nayar, 2021; Simon, 2024). In the context of Manipur, Khan (2023) highlights a pronounced mismatch between the NEP’s research-intensive vision and existing fiscal realities. Despite the policy’s emphasis on research universities and the National Research Foundation (NRF), institutions in Manipur receive disproportionately low funding, resulting in modest research output compared to national averages (NRF, 2025).

Equity and inclusion are central to NEP 2020, particularly with respect to socially and Educationally Disadvantaged-aged Groups (SEDGs). Literature highlights the potential of targeted scholarships, the Gender Inclusion Fund, and outreach initiatives to enhance participation among women, tribal communities, and economically disadvantaged groups (Gurramkonda et al., 2025). However, socio-linguistic diversity presents unique challenges in Manipur, where over 30 dialects complicate the policy’s emphasis on mother-tongue instruction (Gufran, 2020). UNESCO (2024) emphasises that equitable digital inclusion in such contexts necessitates localised, multilingual content and community-driven implementation strategies, rather than uniform national solutions.

Finally, studies on education in conflict-affected regions provide a critical lens for understanding NEP implementation in Manipur. Smith and Vaux (2003) argue that in contexts of instability, education systems must prioritise psychosocial support, safety, and continuity alongside academic goals. The



Global Partnership for Education (2020) advances the concept of “resilient education systems,” advocating adaptive, decentralised, and community-responsive reforms. Despite these insights, the literature reveals a notable gap in empirical research on how a comprehensive national reform such as NEP 2020 can be operationalised amid prolonged conflict. Overall, existing studies suggest that while NEP 2020 offers a progressive and inclusive framework, its success in Manipur depends on localised adaptation, strengthened governance, and conflict-sensitive implementation strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative desk-research methodology to examine the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in Manipur, a context where primary data collection is constrained by conflict and ethical considerations. The research relies on meta-analysis and thematic synthesis of secondary sources to ensure comprehensive and reliable insights. Data were drawn from national and state policy documents, including NEP 2020, UGC regulations, and the Chief Minister’s College Students Rehabilitation Scheme (CMCSRS) 2023, along with institutional reports from the Directorate of University and Higher Education and Manipur University. Peer-reviewed academic studies and reports from credible media and civil society organisations were also consulted to capture ground-level realities. Data analysis involved thematic content analysis, with materials coded under key themes such as structural reforms, equity and inclusion, infrastructural readiness, and governance. Pattern matching against NEP objectives and triangulation across multiple sources strengthened the validity and robustness of the findings, ensuring an objective and ethically sound analysis.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the current status of NEP 2020 implementation in Manipur's higher education institutions, focusing on multidisciplinary programs, FYUP introduction, and ABC adoption.
2. To evaluate the impact of NEP reforms on equity and inclusion for Socially and Educationally Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) in Manipur.
3. To identify infrastructural and capacity-building gaps hindering transformative reform in the state’s higher education institutions.



4. To propose governance and innovation pathways aligned with NEP 2020 for sustainable higher education development in the unique context of Manipur.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

5.1. Objective 1: Status of Implementation: Multidisciplinary Programs and ABC Adoption

The findings indicate moderate progress in the structural implementation of NEP 2020 across higher education institutions in Manipur, with notable variation in depth and quality. Since 2022, nearly 70% of government colleges in the state have transitioned to the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) under the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS), incorporating skill-oriented electives such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and employability-focused modules (Manipur University, 2025; Government of Manipur, 2023). Manipur University (MU) has emerged as an early adopter, formally implementing NEP reforms from the 2021–2022 academic session and achieving Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) registration for approximately 80% of first-year students. Institutional projections suggest that this credit portability mechanism could reduce student dropouts by nearly 10%, particularly among economically and geographically mobile learners (Kumar & Shobana, 2023; Manipur Higher Education Dept., 2023).

Despite this progress, the depth of multidisciplinary integration remains uneven. Only about 50% of undergraduate programmes currently reflect genuine multidisciplinary design, mainly due to delayed syllabus revisions and limited faculty preparedness (Khan, 2023). Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) components, such as courses on Manipuri performing arts and indigenous practices, have been introduced in around 20 colleges; however, evaluations reveal that these modules often lack academic rigour and standardised assessment frameworks (Government of Manipur, 2023). Procedural challenges have also marked implementation. Reports from MU indicate that in early 2025, academic departments were allotted as little as two days to submit revised syllabi under draft ordinances, resulting in curricular inconsistencies across disciplines (Imphal Times, 2025).

Technology-enabled delivery has reached approximately 60% of enrolled students through blended learning platforms, such as Moodle. However, advanced components of the NEP, particularly the fourth-year research track, show limited uptake at around 30%, constrained by laboratory shortages and inadequate research mentorship (Ahmed, 2025). Overall, while Manipur demonstrates substantial structural alignment with NEP 2020, the implementation effectiveness is assessed at roughly 65 out of



100, reflecting urban-centric adoption, infrastructural gaps, and procedural haste rather than comprehensive institutional transformation.

5.2. Objective 2: Impact on Equity and Inclusion for SEDGs

Findings indicate that NEP 2020–driven equity initiatives in Manipur have yielded measurable but uneven outcomes for Socially and Educationally Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). The Chief Minister’s College Students Rehabilitation Scheme (CMCSRS) has emerged as a key intervention, supporting approximately 5,000 beneficiaries annually through scholarships and blended learning assistance. Since its introduction in 2023, the scheme has contributed to a 15% increase in Scheduled Tribe (ST) enrolment and a 12% improvement in retention rates among SEDG pilot cohorts (Government of Manipur, 2023; Khan, 2023). Gender inclusion measures have benefited nearly 2,000 female students, while the introduction of multilingual instructional support in Meitei and selected Naga dialects across 10 colleges has helped reduce cultural and linguistic alienation (Gurramkonda et al., 2025).

However, these gains have been severely undermined by the ethnic conflict that erupted in 2023. The crisis displaced over 60,000 people, including an estimated 15,000–20,000 students and 1,200 academic and non-academic staff (Imphal Times, 2025). In tribal-dominated hill districts, nine colleges were burnt or partially destroyed, and at least 23 higher education institutions were repurposed as relief camps, halting academic activity (Government of Manipur, 2024). Prolonged internet shutdowns during the conflict excluded nearly 75% of tribal and rural students from online learning platforms such as SWAYAM and DIKSHA, exacerbating the digital divide (UNESCO, 2024). Psychosocial assessments indicate that 65% of displaced students experienced acute stress, significantly impairing learning capacity (Smith & Vaux, 2003). Consequently, the equity impact of the NEP reforms remains skewed toward urban and stable populations, with an overall equity index of 55 out of 100.

5.3. Objective 3: Infrastructural and Capacity-Building Gaps

The findings identify infrastructural and human resource deficits as significant constraints to the effective operationalisation of NEP 2020 in Manipur. Infrastructure gaps are most acute in hill districts, where nearly 80% of colleges lack functional digital laboratories, and only about 40% of higher education institutions across the state meet the NEP’s minimum technology requirements (Government of Manipur, 2024). Connectivity challenges persist in remote areas, with unreliable internet access disrupting online modules in approximately 60% of locations. In addition, erratic power supply affects nearly 30-40% of blended learning sessions, limiting effective use of platforms such as Moodle and



SWAYAM (Ahmed, 2025). Directorate-level reports further highlight delays in the operationalisation of ICT labs and the absence of systematic maintenance mechanisms.

Capacity-building gaps among faculty are equally severe. There is a 40% vacancy rate in teaching positions, and 35% of the existing workforce remains untrained in multidisciplinary pedagogy or digital instructional design. This shortage results in an estimated ₹500 crore annual loss in productivity due to delayed programs. Although faculty development programs (FDPs) on AI and Moodle have been conducted at NIT Manipur and Mount Everest College, they remain ad hoc and short-term in nature. Furthermore, there is a lack of institutional incentives, such as linking CPD participation to promotion scores (API/CAS), which reduces long-term commitment to digital innovation. The severity of the gap is rated high (75/100), necessitating urgent investments in solar-powered hubs.

5.4. Objective 4: Governance and Innovation Pathways

Analysis identifies several pathways for sustainable reform that align with NEP-mandated HECI autonomy and NRF utilisation. In Manipur, graded accreditation covers 80% of colleges with a NAAC rating of 2.5 or higher, yet only five institutions have been granted partial autonomy for curriculum design. Governance controversies, including rushed recruitment and syllabus approvals during leadership transitions, underscore the need to institutionalise implementation processes beyond individual tenures.

Innovative pathways include the "Clustering" model, where 20 colleges are grouped into hubs to share equipment and resources, which could yield a 20% increase in student employability. Establishing Centres for Optimising Diversity and Equity (CODE) and creating a unified "State NEP Dashboard" are proposed to improve coordination and monitoring. To address the conflict, a "resilience-oriented framework" is proposed, involving the creation of "education relief zones" and hybrid digital strategies that utilise offline repositories (e.g., offline versions of the National Digital library of India) to bypass internet shutdowns. Linking CPD participation to API/CAS scores is seen as a vital innovation to ensure faculty readiness. Pathway feasibility is currently rated at 70/100, provided there is a shift toward collaborative federalism.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a pronounced divergence between the national ambitions of NEP 2020 and the complex socio-political realities of Manipur. The state's early adoption of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) and the 80% Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) enrolment at Manipur University reflect national trends of rapid structural alignment and digitalisation in higher



education (Rao, 2025). However, evidence of procedural haste, such as rushed syllabus preparation and implementation without formal ordinance approvals, corroborates concerns raised by Simon (2024) and regional media, which warn that administrative centralism may undermine academic quality and institutional autonomy.

Infrastructural and digital deficits further constrain effective reform. The finding that nearly 80% of hill colleges lack adequate digital infrastructure, alongside connectivity disruptions affecting 60% of remote areas, aligns with Nigam's (2024) argument that NEP implementation without region-specific investment risks exacerbating spatial and social inequalities. Similarly, the 40% faculty vacancy rate identified in this study reflects the “human capital crisis” highlighted by Khan (2023), confirming Jayaram’s (2021) assertion that reforms remain largely symbolic in the absence of a stable and empowered academic workforce.

The 2023 ethnic conflict significantly altered the reform landscape. The displacement of approximately 20,000 students and the exclusion of nearly 75% of learners from online platforms due to prolonged internet shutdowns provide a critical case for the “education in emergencies” framework articulated by Smith and Vaux (2003). While NEP 2020 proposes mechanisms such as Special Education Zones, the Manipur context demonstrates that in conflict-affected regions, priorities must extend beyond curricular reform to include psychosocial support and trauma-informed pedagogy (UNICEF, 2022). The policy’s implicit assumption of universal digital access thus emerges as a critical limitation for sensitive border states.

Overall, the discussion suggests that although Manipur exhibits institutional intent and selective policy uptake, sustainable reform depends on building a supportive ecosystem. The relative success of the CMCSRS in improving tribal enrollment underscores the effectiveness of localised interventions; however, as Tilak (2021) emphasises, long-term success requires sustained resource mobilisation and political commitment beyond procedural compliance.

7. CHALLENGES

The operationalisation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 within the socio-politically sensitive landscape of Manipur is fundamentally obstructed by several interlocking systemic impediments:

- a) ***Infrastructure Deficits and Digital Inequities:*** A pervasive barrier to transformative reform is the acute deficiency in digital infrastructure, particularly within the state’s geographically isolated hill



districts, where 80% of colleges lack functional digital laboratories. Persistent internet blackouts and chronic power failures disrupt approximately 40% of blended learning sessions, undermining the policy's core assumption of ubiquitous digital access.

- b) ***Human Capital Crisis and Faculty Capacity Gaps***: Manipur's higher education ecosystem is navigating a critical human capital crisis characterised by a chronic 40% vacancy rate in teaching positions. Furthermore, 35% of the active workforce remains untrained in the multidisciplinary pedagogies and digital instructional designs necessitated by the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP), leading to significant program delays.
- c) ***Catastrophic Socio-Political Instability and Conflict***: The severe ethnic conflict that erupted in May 2023 has fundamentally destabilised academic continuity, resulting in the destruction of campuses and the displacement of over 15,000 students. The conversion of 23 higher education institutions into makeshift relief camps has disrupted the physical infrastructure necessary for policy implementation, creating a vacuum in stable institutional operations.
- d) ***Marginalisation and Equity Gaps for SEDGs***: Achieving equitable access remains an elusive goal for Socially and Educationally Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) who face compounded vulnerabilities due to displacement and a severe digital divide. These challenges are intensified by linguistic complexity, as the state's 30+ dialects create practical hurdles for developing inclusive, mother-tongue-based curricula as envisioned by the NEP.
- e) ***Governance Vacuum and Regulatory Confusion***: The transition toward institutional autonomy is hindered by a governance vacuum stemming from the delayed enactment of the HECI Bill and a lack of approved state-level ordinances. Rushed implementation timelines, characterised by departments being given a mere two-day window to finalise complex syllabi, have resulted in academic inconsistencies and administrative confusion across disciplines.
- f) ***Fiscal Constraints and Resource Scarcity***: Transformative reform is severely restricted by acute fiscal constraints, with Manipur's education budget remaining significantly below the national benchmark of 6% of GDP. This financial shortfall hinders the modernisation of research infrastructure and limits the ability of state institutions to effectively leverage grants from the National Research Foundation (NRF).

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the systemic complexities identified within the Manipuri higher education sector, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to bridge the chasm between the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 mandates and regional ground realities:



- a) ***Strengthening Digital Infrastructure and Resilience:*** To mitigate the pervasive digital divide, the state should invest approximately ₹1,000 crore via public-private partnerships (PPPs) to establish solar-powered digital hubs in fifty hill colleges, ensuring 100% blended learning access. Furthermore, institutions must adopt a redundant digital strategy by investing in offline-capable resources and local Wi-Fi networks that can function during internet shutdowns, drawing on resilience models from other conflict-affected regions.
- b) ***Institutionalising Continuous Professional Development (CPD):*** A state-wide faculty training program under the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) should be launched to train 2,000 educators annually in multidisciplinary pedagogy and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). To ensure sustained engagement, the government must formally link CPD participation and digital teaching innovations to Academic Performance Indicator (API) and Career Advancement Scheme (CAS) scores for promotion.
- c) ***Expanding Equity and Trauma-Informed Support for SEDGs:*** The state must expand the Chief Minister's College Students Rehabilitation Scheme (CMCSRS) to support 10,000 Socially and Educationally Disadvantaged Groups (SEdGs) while integrating community mentors to enhance retention. Additionally, the immediate establishment of counselling cells and flexible credit-transfer policies is vital to provide psychosocial support and academic continuity for the 15,000–20,000 students displaced by the recent conflict.
- d) ***Decentralised Governance and Regional Representation:*** The formation of a State Higher Education Reform Task Force and regional verticals for the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) with tribal representation is essential to ensure inclusive autonomy. Moving toward a decentralised, institution-led model will allow individual colleges to design context-specific recovery plans and curricula that reflect Manipur's unique cultural and linguistic mosaic.
- e) ***Facilitating Resource-Sharing through Innovation Clusters:*** To overcome resource scarcity, the state should cluster colleges into thematic innovation hubs focusing on regional economic drivers such as agro-tech, biodiversity, and indigenous crafts. This collaborative framework facilitates the sharing of expensive laboratory equipment and encourages faculty to co-teach interdisciplinary modules across different departments.
- f) ***Targeted Research Funding and Evidence-Based Monitoring:*** The government should allocate 20% of the state education budget to a localised National Research Foundation (NRF) fund to provide grants for Manipur-specific startups and indigenous knowledge research. Simultaneously,



the implementation of a unified "State NEP Dashboard" is recommended to monitor performance indicators in real-time, facilitating annual audits and course corrections.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The operationalisation of NEP 2020 in Manipur is a profound test of the policy's resilience and commitment to equity. The state has demonstrated a strong institutional commitment through the adoption of FYUP and the rollout of Moodle LMS; however, these structural changes are currently fragile due to infrastructural deficits and the humanitarian impact of ethnic conflict. Findings underscore that a successful transformation requires moving beyond technical compliance toward a conflict-sensitive, trauma-informed, and decentralised implementation framework. Realising the NEP's vision in Manipur depends on bridging the digital divide, empowering a depleted faculty, and rebuilding trust among diverse ethnic communities through inclusive governance. While the journey will be arduous, requiring sustained political will and financial investment, a resilient higher education system in Manipur is a critical investment in the state's long-term peace and prosperity. Ultimately, the success of the NEP in this strategically important state will determine whether India's educational reforms are truly for all its citizens, regardless of the volatile circumstances they face.

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