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## From Policy to Practice: A Conceptual Analysis of NEP 2020s Equity Provision for Muslim Minorities

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### ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlight a significant shift in India's education framework by emphasizing fairness, equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning. Even with these commitments, historically marginalized Muslim communities face educational disadvantages throughout the access, participation, and outcomes. This paper shows conceptual analysis of the evolution of educational policies in India, assessing how equity provisions have addressed or failed to address the educational needs of Muslim community. By analysing the policy from the National Policy on Education (1968) to NEP 2020, this paper identifies structural gaps between policy objectives and implementation. The paper highlights chronic challenges such as enrolment inequalities, access to higher education, socio-economic issues, and institutional exclusion, and proposes policy recommendations to translate equity-based policy goals into effective practice.

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### INTRODUCTION



Education has long been regarded as a crucial tool for social transformation, economic mobility, and democratic participation. In a diverse and hierarchical society such as India, education policy plays an important role in addressing historical inequalities among marginalized social groups. Since independence, the India has introduced several education policies aimed at increasing access, improving quality, and promoting equity. However, disparities in educational inclusion and results persist, specifically among religious minorities, with Muslims remaining one of the most educationally backward communities in India.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that Muslims in India lag behind national averages in literacy rates, school retention, and higher education participation (Sachar Committee, 2006; Deshpande, 2019). This backwardness is not only cultural or attitudinal but are deeply integrated in socio-economic backwardness, geographical segregation, and limited institutional support. While sequential educational policies have emphasized equality, equity and inclusion, their ability to address the specific educational needs of Muslim minorities has very less.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlight a significant shift from earlier policies focusing on equity, inclusion, flexibility, and lifelong learning as a core principle.

The policy recognises “Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups” (SEDGs) and proposes targeted mechanisms such as Special Education Zones and financial supportive scheme. However, NEP 2020 largely adopts a universal approach to equity, raising concerns about whether generalized frameworks are sufficient to address the distinctive educational challenges faced by Muslim minorities.

Against this backdrop, the present study undertakes a conceptual analysis of India’s major education policies\_ from the National Policy on Education (1968) to NEP 2020, to examine the extent to which equity provisions have addressed the educational needs of Muslim minorities. The paper seeks to identify structural gaps between policy intent and outcomes and to propose policy recommendations aimed at improving educational equity and inclusion.

### **Objectives;**

1. To assess the evolution of education policies in India with special reference to equity and minority inclusion.
2. To analyse how the major educational policies have addressed the educational needs of Muslim minorities in India.



3. To Identify the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps between policy design and implementation.

### **1. Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative and conceptual research methodology, based on secondary data. The analysis is based on official policy documents, including national education policies, and government reports. In addition to scholarly articles, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and committee reports related to education policy and minority studies have been systematically analysed.

### **2. Muslims as an Educationally Marginalized Group: A Conceptual Perspective**

Muslims in India can be conceptualized as an educationally marginalized group due to the intersection of socio-economic deprivation, spatial segregation, and limited institutional access. Scholarly analyses emphasize that Muslim educational disadvantage is not inherent but structurally produced through historical neglect, uneven development, and policy gaps (Sachar Committee, 2006; Hasan, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, Muslim marginalization in education exemplifies intersectional disadvantage, where religion intersects with class, region, and gender to shape unequal educational trajectories. This conceptual lens highlights that policies addressing educational equity must account for these layered disadvantages rather than treating Muslims as a homogenous or residual category within broader disadvantaged groups.

NEP 2020's classification of disadvantaged learners under Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) reflects a universalist equity approach. However, the lack of explicit attention to Muslim minorities raises conceptual concerns about visibility, targeting, and the capacity of such frameworks to address group-specific educational barriers.

### **3. Minority Education in India**

#### **3.1 Constitutional Provisions: Articles 29 and 30**

The Indian Constitution provides explicit safeguards for minority education through Articles 29 and 30, reflecting the country's commitment to cultural pluralism.

Article 29 guarantees the right of any section of citizens to conserve their distinct language, script, or culture, while Article 30 grants religious and linguistic minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice (Government of India, 1950).



These provisions were designed to protect minorities from assimilationist pressures and to ensure that education serves as a means of cultural preservation and empowerment. Constitutionally, minority education is therefore not a matter of welfare alone but a fundamental right linked to democratic citizenship and cultural autonomy.

**3.2 A brief overview of the major education policies in India since independence, their objectives, and impact on Muslim minority.**

Policy Name and Year	Objectives of the Policy	Impact on Muslim Minorities	Gaps Identified
National Policy on Education (NPE)1968	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Free and compulsory education</li> <li>▪ Emphasis on three language formula</li> <li>▪ Promotion of national integration</li> <li>▪ Equalisation of Educational opportunity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improved access to basic schooling, limited outreach in Muslim-concentrated area</li> <li>▪ Linguistic policy created challenges for Urdu medium learners</li> <li>▪ Structural inequalities largely unaddressed</li> </ul>	Lack of explicit minority-specific targeting
National Policy on Education (NPE)1986	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Equity and access for disadvantage groups</li> <li>▪ Expansion of elementary education</li> <li>▪ Focus on adult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explicit recognition of minorities as educationally disadvantaged.</li> <li>▪ Some institutional support (e.g. Urdu</li> </ul>	Weak implementation of equity provisions



	education and minorities	education, minority institutions)	
Programme of Action (PoA)1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Universalisation of education</li> <li>▪ Equity and inclusion</li> <li>▪ Decentralization and management</li> <li>▪ Gender equality</li> <li>▪ National integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Regional and local disparities meant Muslim concentrated areas often received inadequate resources and institutional support.</li> <li>▪ Gender gaps among girls persisted</li> </ul>	Over-reliance on decentralization without safeguards
The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Every child of the age of six to fourteen years, shall have the right to free and compulsory education in a neighbourhood school till the completion of his or her elementary education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Legal provision improved enrolment among Muslim minorities students</li> <li>▪ Madrasas largely remain outside the main stream education system</li> <li>▪ Quality of education and student retention issues continued</li> </ul>	Inadequate integration Madrasas with main stream education

**4. Overview of NEP 2020: Equity Provisions**



## NEP 2020's Vision of Inclusive Education

Equity and inclusion constitute one of the foundational pillars of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**. The policy explicitly acknowledges that India's education system has historically been characterized by unequal access, participation, and outcomes, resulting from social, economic, gender-based, regional, and cultural disparities (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). NEP 2020 envisions an education system that is inclusive by design, ensuring that *all learners*, irrespective of background, are able to enter, participate in, and complete education at all levels.

NEP 2020's inclusive vision is aligned with constitutional values and international frameworks such as **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)**, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). However, as a conceptual policy document, NEP 2020 primarily outlines principles and strategies, leaving questions regarding implementation and group-specific outcomes open for analysis.

### 4.1 Key Concepts underlying Equity in NEP 2020

#### Access, Participation, and Retention

NEP 2020 conceptualizes equity across three interrelated dimensions: **access**, **participation**, and **retention**.

- **Access** refers to the ability of learners to enter educational institutions at different stages, including early childhood education, schooling, and higher education.
- **Participation** emphasizes meaningful engagement in teaching–learning processes, curricular activities, and institutional life.
- **Retention** focuses on learners' ability to continue and complete education without dropping out due to economic, social, or institutional constraints (MoE, 2020).

### 4.2 Policy-Practice Gap: A Theoretical Discussion

The gap between policy formulation and policy implementation is a well-documented challenge in educational reform, particularly in complex and diverse societies such as India. While policies like the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** articulate progressive and equity-oriented visions, their translation into practice is mediated by institutional, political, and social realities. This section



theoretically examines why well-intentioned education policies often fail to achieve their intended outcomes, with specific reference to equity provisions and minority inclusion.

### **4.3 Challenges and Constraint in Policy Implementation**

From a theoretical perspective, policy failure does not necessarily result from poor planning or inadequate vision, but from the disconnect between **policy design** and **implementation capacity**. Educational policies are often formulated at the central level with broad objectives, while implementation occurs at decentralized levels where institutional capacity, resources, and contextual understanding vary widely (Hill & Hupe, 2014).

NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive and aspirational framework for equity and inclusion. However, as a **value-based policy document**, it outlines goals rather than enforceable mechanisms. Theoretical literature on public policy implementation suggests that when policies lack clear operational guidelines, timelines, and accountability structures, they are prone to selective or uneven implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984).

In the context of Muslim minorities, this gap is particularly salient. Broad equity goals may fail to translate into targeted actions addressing specific educational barriers unless policy instruments are explicitly designed to engage with historically marginalized communities.

### **4.4 Bureaucratic, Political, and Social Constraints**

#### **Bureaucratic Constraints**

Bureaucratic systems play a central role in translating policy into practice. However, administrative inertia, capacity deficits, and rigid hierarchies often constrain effective implementation. Educational bureaucracies may lack adequate training, resources, or incentives to prioritize equity-oriented reforms, particularly those involving marginalized groups (Tilak, 2018).

#### **Political Constraints**

Political priorities and ideological considerations significantly shape how education policies are implemented. While NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusivity, its implementation depends on political will at both the national and state levels. Policies addressing minority inclusion may encounter resistance due to political polarization or competing electoral considerations (Hasan, 2018).

#### **Social Constraints**



Social attitudes, prejudices, and institutional cultures also influence policy outcomes. Educational institutions operate within broader social contexts where discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusionary practices may persist. These social constraints can undermine equity initiatives, even when policies formally endorse inclusion (UNESCO, 2017).

For Muslim minorities, experiences of social marginalization and mistrust of public institutions can further limit the effectiveness of policy interventions, contributing to lower participation and engagement despite formal access.

### **5. Synthesis: Understanding the Policy-Practice Gap**

The policy-practice gap in NEP 2020 can thus be understood as the result of intersecting structural factors: ambitious but non-operational policy design, bureaucratic and political constraints, federal variability, and weak monitoring mechanisms. From a theoretical perspective, these constraints highlight the limits of universalist policy frameworks that do not explicitly address group-specific marginalization.

For Muslim minorities, this gap underscores the risk that equity provisions may remain aspirational unless supported by explicit recognition, targeted implementation strategies, and accountability structures. Addressing the policy–practice gap is therefore not merely a technical challenge but a normative one, requiring sustained commitment to social justice and institutional reform.

### **6. Conclusion**

India’s educational policy evolution from the National policy on Education 1968 to the National Policy on Education 2020 highlights a persistent gap between equity-oriented policy commitments and their outcomes for the Muslim minority. Despite constitutional safeguards and inclusive policy discourse emphasizing access and retention, Muslim community continue to experience structural disadvantages shaped by socio-economic marginalization, geographical segregation, and institutional neglect. While NEP 2020 articulates an ambitious and inclusive vision, its largely universalistic framework risks overlooking Muslim-specific educational challenges due to the absence of explicit targeting and concrete implementation mechanism addressing intersecting forms of exclusion.

This disparity between policy intent is further deepened by lack of administrative action, political limitations, and deep-rooted societal bias all of which weaken the implementation of equity-oriented measures. This entails strengthening accountability mechanism, ensuring dedicated resource for minority-concentrated regions, and fostering an inclusive institutional culture that actively combats



discrimination. Only through such deliberate and focused efforts can India's education system truly advanced towards the idea of equity, inclusion and social justice envisioned in its policy discourse.

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