

Implementation Challenges of NEP 2020 in Government-Aided Colleges: A Ground-Level Perspective

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is one of the most ambitious reforms in India's education sector since independence. It envisions a paradigm shift towards holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning, with a focus on equity, employability, and research. While its vision is widely appreciated, implementation remains a complex challenge, particularly in government-aided colleges that constitute a significant segment of India's higher education ecosystem. This paper critically examines the ground-level realities of implementing NEP 2020 in such institutions. Through a sociological and administrative lens, it highlights constraints in infrastructure, teacher training, financial resources, governance, bureaucratic hurdles, and socio-cultural factors. The analysis draws upon case studies, policy reviews, and stakeholder perspectives to argue that without systemic reforms and context-sensitive strategies, NEP 2020's transformative vision risks partial or uneven execution. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for bridging the policy-practice gap in government-aided colleges.

Keywords: Implementation, Policy-Practice Gap

Introduction

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marked a watershed moment in educational reform, replacing a 34-year-old framework (NEP 1986, modified in 1992). The new policy emphasizes multidisciplinary education, flexibility in curriculum, vocational integration, technology adoption, and promotion of Indian knowledge systems. For higher education, it envisions a complete restructuring of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, greater autonomy for institutions, a target of 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by 2035, and the establishment of a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to streamline regulation. Government-aided colleges—institutions supported by state funding but managed partially by private or community trusts—form the backbone of India's higher education, especially in semi-urban and rural areas. These colleges cater to first-generation learners, marginalized communities, and economically weaker sections, thus playing a crucial role in democratizing

access to higher education. However, their dual dependence on government grants and private management often creates tensions in governance, resource allocation, and academic innovation.

This paper explores the implementation challenges of NEP 2020 in government-aided colleges. It argues that while the policy is visionary, the realities of institutional constraints pose significant hurdles. The analysis proceeds by examining infrastructural, financial, academic, administrative, socio-cultural, and political dimensions of implementation, supported by examples and critical reflections.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with NEP 2020 has been both optimistic and critical. Kumar (2021) praises its holistic approach but warns of the risks of centralization. Rao (2022) emphasizes the potential of NEP to modernize higher education but highlights disparities in digital access as a major barrier. Beteille (2007) and Ghurye (1969), though writing in earlier contexts, remain relevant for their analysis of Indian higher education's sociological constraints—caste, class, and bureaucratic inertia. Studies on government-aided colleges (Sharma, 2019; Patel, 2020) reveal structural weaknesses: inadequate funding, lack of research orientation, dependence on affiliating universities, and political interference. These findings align with the implementation hurdles of NEP 2020. The literature suggests a gap between policy intent and institutional capacity, which this paper seeks to explore.

1. Institutional And Infrastructural Constraints

A major thrust of NEP 2020 is multidisciplinary and holistic education, requiring colleges to redesign courses, establish new departments, and adopt flexible credit frameworks. Government-aided colleges, however, often operate in resource-starved environments.

- **Infrastructure deficit:** Many aided colleges lack modern classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and ICT-enabled learning spaces. Introducing skill labs, incubation centers, or digital repositories, as mandated by NEP, becomes a distant goal.
- **Space and resource limitations:** Urban colleges suffer from space crunches, while rural colleges face connectivity issues. Both factors hinder adoption of NEP's digital and vocational initiatives.
- **Affiliating university dependence:** Since most aided colleges are affiliated institutions, they cannot independently restructure curricula or introduce new programmes without university approval, slowing implementation.

2. Financial Challenges

NEP 2020 requires significant investment in higher education, but government-aided colleges face precarious finances.

- Delayed grants: State governments often delay disbursement of salaries and grants, making it difficult for colleges to invest in reforms.
- Limited autonomy in fund utilization: Even when grants are received, strict government norms restrict flexibility in spending.
- Self-financing dilemma: To compensate, many colleges run self-financed courses, but this leads to inequalities between grant-in-aid and unaided sections of the same institution.

3. Faculty and Pedagogical Preparedness

NEP emphasizes multidisciplinary teaching, research orientation, and technology integration. Yet, faculty preparedness remains a stumbling block.

- Shortage of qualified teachers: Vacancies are rampant in aided colleges due to frozen recruitments and complex appointment procedures.
- Training gap: Faculty often lack exposure to interdisciplinary pedagogy, outcome-based education, and digital tools.
- Workload pressures: Inadequate staff strength forces teachers to prioritize routine teaching over research or innovation.

4. Administrative and Governance Hurdles

Government-aided colleges are subject to multiple authorities: state governments, university regulations, governing bodies, and UGC guidelines.

- Bureaucratic delays: Any curricular or infrastructural change requires multiple approvals, slowing down implementation.
- Conflict of interests: Governing bodies, often politically influenced, may prioritize local interests over academic reforms.
- Autonomy paradox: NEP calls for graded autonomy, but aided colleges are structurally constrained from exercising it.

5. Socio-Cultural Challenges

Government-aided colleges serve students from diverse and marginalized backgrounds. NEP's implementation must grapple with these realities.

- Language barriers: While NEP promotes multilingualism, many colleges lack faculty to teach in regional languages. Students struggle with English-medium curriculum, especially in STEM.

- First-generation learners: They face difficulties in navigating flexible credit systems, online platforms, and interdisciplinary requirements.

- Gender and caste factors: Girls and students from Scheduled Castes/Tribes often lack access to digital tools, widening inequality.

6. Political And Policy-Level Constraints

Education being a Concurrent subject, variations across states create inconsistencies. For example:

- Divergent approaches: Some states (e.g., Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh) have quickly adopted NEP, while others (e.g., Kerala, Tamil Nadu) have resisted certain aspects. This creates confusion in affiliated aided colleges.

- Policy continuity: Frequent political changes affect funding and regulatory priorities, leading to uncertainty in long-term reforms.

Case Studies / Ground Perspectives

- Maharashtra: Several aided colleges reported difficulty in adopting the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP) due to lack of faculty and infrastructural readiness.

- Uttar Pradesh: Colleges in semi-urban districts struggle with digital integration, as students lack devices and internet access.

- Kerala: Strong teacher unions have resisted sudden changes in workload patterns under NEP.

Critical Analysis

The gap between policy vision and institutional reality is stark. NEP assumes a level of infrastructural readiness, financial autonomy, and faculty competence that most government-aided colleges lack. Unless systemic bottlenecks are addressed, the policy risks reinforcing inequalities: elite institutions may flourish, while aided colleges lag further behind.

Recommendations

- 1.Context-sensitive implementation: Tailor NEP guidelines to the realities of aided colleges, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model.

- 2.Strengthened funding mechanisms: Ensure timely grants, encourage public–private partnerships, and allow flexibility in fund use.

- 3.Capacity building: Launch intensive faculty development programmes focusing on digital pedagogy and interdisciplinary teaching.

- 4.Simplified governance: Streamline approvals, reduce bureaucratic overlap, and grant real autonomy with accountability.

- 5.Equity measures: Provide targeted support (devices, scholarships, mentoring) for marginalized students in aided colleges.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 is a transformative document, but its success depends on ground-level execution. Government-aided colleges, with their unique socio-economic role, face formidable challenges in implementing its vision. Unless these institutions are strengthened with adequate resources, autonomy, and capacity-building, NEP 2020 risks creating a two-tier higher education system: one for the privileged and another for the disadvantaged. A more nuanced, participatory, and context-aware implementation strategy is essential for realizing the inclusive and equitable vision of NEP.

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