

Lifelong Learning for All: A Critical Analysis of NEP 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal 4 in India

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the role of lifelong learning within India's NEP 2020, and within UN's SDG 4, using the indicators of policy analysis, conceptualizations of lifelong learning from the UNESCO theory of lifelong learning, and national survey datasets. While NEP 2020 and SDG 4 have a similar philosophical stance regarding inclusive and lifelong learning, there exists a meaningful gap in four key areas: institutional, digital, linguistic, and financial. Bridging these gaps is critical for the development of an equitable lifelong learning ecosystem in India. The paper explains how the Continuing Education and Extension departments acted as a bridge between the formal education system and community-based learning needs.

Keywords: *Lifelong Learning; NEP 2020; SDG 4; Adult Education; Continuing Education; Inclusive Education; India.*

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, lifelong learning has undergone a thorough reconceptualisation: no longer a tertiary and complementary dimension to mainstream education, it is a necessary response to the radical changes brought about by technology, demographics and social developments (Jarvis, 2007; Longworth, 2003). For a country like India, with a population of more than 1.4 billion, with 22 Scheduled Languages and deep, structural inequalities along the lines of caste, gender and geography, the need to institutionalize lifelong learning is pressing and politically important. The NEP 2020 is the most thorough revamp of the Indian education system since 1986. It seeks to make transformational reforms in all levels of education including Early Childhood Care and Education, School Education, Higher Education and Adult Education. SDG 4 was adopted by the UN in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For the first time, all countries committed to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations, 2015). Alongside the Education 2030 Framework for Action, this presents a potentially transformative architecture for education development internationally, but there remains contention over how far policy moves are translatable into institutional practices (UNESCO, 2015).

In this article, we examine the conceptual and operational definitions of lifelong learning in NEP 2020 and SDG 4 (through structured literature review, comparative policy analysis) alongside the persistent structural barriers to lifelong learning for the most marginalized groups in India, despite the promise of these policy documents.

2. Literature Review

Much of the intellectual genealogy of lifelong learning can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century UNESCO tradition. One of its early forerunners was Lengrand (1965) who pioneered the process of rethinking the education-life relationship. These ideas became more systematic in the famous Faure Commission Report Learning to Be (1972), calling for a conception of education as a process coextensive with human existence in all its social and institutional manifestations (Faure et al., 1972). The humanistic vision was developed further by the Delors Commission in Learning: The Treasure Within (1996), which described what it called its four pillars of education: Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together, and Learning to Be. These pillars are still part of active policy discussions (Delors, 1996).

The Canadian writers Jarvis (2007) and Knapper and Cropley (2000) both place lifelong learning and the learning society in the context of globalization. Jarvis sees the learning society as a contested notion that has been subordinated under the national agenda of economic productivity at the cost of education's humanistic and liberating potential. Knapper and Cropley distinguish between instrumentalist models of lifelong learning (training for the skills needed in the labor market) and transformative models of lifelong learning (empowerment and social justice). This distinction is particularly pronounced in the Indian policy context, where NEP 2020 invokes both models of lifelong learning.

A second theoretical point of reference for this approach is Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy. Education can never be neutral, but either liberative or domesticated, thus adult literacy and further education is, in particular, always a political project. As Yadav and Sharma (2018) examine in the Indian context, continuing education departments at Indian universities have been chronically under-resourced and marginalized within the institutional space, a manifestation of a wider hierarchy of adult education in which formal, credentialed instruction is prioritized over community-based, informal or nonformal learning. The World Bank's World Development Report 2019 on the Changing Nature of Work highlights the urgency of lifelong skill development as a response to global labour market changes due to automation and digitalisation. For developing countries like India, this raises essential equality questions: whose skills are developed, through which institutions, towards whose economic gain? Considering that the National Statistical Office (NSO) estimated that 313 million adults in India are functionally illiterate (NSO, 2018), such conceptions of market-oriented lifelong learning assume that a basic level of educational attainment exists where it very well may not. These studies suggest that lifelong learning requires a political commitment from institutions, equitable access to resources, and real community representation to move beyond the level of aspirational discourses.

3. NEP 2020 and SDG 4: Convergences and Divergences

3.1 Structural Alignments.

The NEP 2020 and SDG 4 are not only similar in spirit, but their targets are also substantially similar. For instance, target 4.6 of SDG states that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). This target under NEP 2020 has been operationalised through Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society (ULLAS) which is a centrally sponsored scheme being implemented from 2022 to 2027 to make 50 million adults above 15 years of age functionally literate and numerate (Government of India, 2022).

Targets 4.3 and 4.4 refer to ensuring equal access to technical, vocational and higher education while increasing the proportion of young and adult population with the relevant skills. In NEP 2020, this is captured through the provision that 50 percent of students should be exposed to vocational education by 2025, and through a multiple entry-exit system under the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) that institutionalizes one of the key structural principles of lifelong education, namely that learning is not linear but distributed over a lifetime (Government of India, 2020).

The NEP 2020 incorporates Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a key element of lifelong learning by documenting the fact that individuals acquire skills and knowledge from formal, non-formal and informal sources. This aligns with the integrated framework set out in Faure et al. (1972) and used by the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (UIL, 2020).

3.2 The Digital Dimension

Digital education provisions under NEP 2020 (i.e. the DIKSHA platform, SWAYAM MOOCs, as well as the proposed National Educational Technology Forum (NETF)) support the thrust of SDG 4 to build inclusive, equitable, safe, resilient and sustainable digital learning infrastructures. However, the underlying digital infrastructures are unevenly distributed. According to the NFHS-5 (2019-21) survey, only 33.3 percent of the Indian households had internet connection, with rural, female, SC/ST population lacking adequate internet access. According to the World Bank (2019), digital exclusion exacerbates underlying issues with human capital, and technology-centric lifelong learning policies are regressive unless coupled with investment in digital connectivity and skills.

4. Discussion: Structural Barriers and Institutional Realities

4.1 The Institutional Marginalization of Continuing Education

The most secured structural barrier to lifelong learning in India is the institutional marginalization of continuing and adult education within the formal university system. (Yadav and Sharma 2018) Almost all Indian state universities operate without dedicated continuing education departments, despite decades of policy rhetoric stressing lifelong learning as an important goal of education. Universities are not only a feature of higher education in India, but the Department of Continuing Education and Extension at the University of Delhi is an exception. This discrepancy between the policy and institutional level reflects the tendency of more formal forms of education, especially at higher levels, to reproduce customary educational hierarchies (Jarvis 2007).

NEP 2020 notes this absence but does not elaborate a mandatory institutional framework for university adult education, and if no binding provisions are made, these institutions will only be considered peripheral to the core university business while funding and positions will be contract-based rather than permanent.

4.2 Gender and Social Equity Dimensions

SDG 4.5 seeks to eliminate gender disparities, along with ensuring equitable access to all levels of education and vocational training. In India, which has a considerably patriarchal society, SDG 4.5 has to be seen in connection with the efforts to ease women's access to organized education, especially among the rural population. Women are systematically excluded from the opportunities and benefits of lifelong learning by restrictions on their mobility, domestic work, early marriage, and by the absence of female community educators (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2020). Though NEP 2020 lays out broad outlines of an inclusive and equitable education system, it does not have targets for adult literacy or vocational education participation level by gender. In the absence of specific adult education targets and a system to monitor planned interventions by gender, caste and geography, ULLAS will continue the historical trend of average literacy rates obscuring intragroup gaps.

4.3 Fiscal and information accountability gaps

The NEP 2020 envisages 6 percent of GDP being spent on education, which India has never achieved, while currently, the public spending on education is approximately 4.6 percent of GDP (NITI Aayog 2023). In this envelope, adult and continuing education receives the smallest share, given its low political salience and distance from credentialing and its correlated economic returns for both the individual and the state. Another accountability gap has to do with data. The SDG India Index, published by NITI Aayog, provides useful state-wise disaggregation of progress achieved towards SDG 4 targets, but data on non-formal and informal learning is fragmented and lacks a common methodology. In this regard, Freire (1970) also noted that failure to document learning as a political act renders invisible all learning that occurs outside state-sponsored institutions, deprioritizing learning that takes place outside formalized structures when allocating precious resources.

4.4 The Role of Extension Departments as Mediating Institutions

In the Indian education context, Departments of Continuing Education and Extension occupy a structurally central but institutionally weak position. Their remit to act as a bridge between the production of knowledge in formal higher education institutions and the learning needs of local communities makes them critical to the successful implementation of a lifelong learning system, as identified in NEP 2020 and SDG 4. Extension education in Indian universities is culturally rooted, based on the model of community service and popular education, as an alternative to the instrumentalists' model of market-based, privatized, lifelong (non-formal) education and the state-driven literacy campaign model (Faure et al., 1972; Delors, 1996).

Potentially, ULLAS contributes to improving this model of teaching a community, by having participating university students and faculty members serve as community teachers. However, the lack of support in terms of faculty positions, research infrastructure, and partnership frameworks may limit the potential for these interventions to be scaled.

5. Conclusion

NEP 2020 and SDG 4 share a philosophical and programmatic commitment to lifelong learning as a democratic right not a market product, and the policy architecture around adult literacy (ULLAS), vocational integration (formal schooling and higher education systems) and flexible learning paths (ABC and RPL mechanisms) that they co-construct represents an important step forward for Indian education policy.

Structural barriers persist in the institutional, financial, digital and political spheres. Poor funding for continuing education in the system, the unequal spread of digital infrastructure, the absence of gender-disaggregated accountability mechanisms and the institutional marginalization of extension departments in universities represent a systematic barrier to realizing lifelong learning among marginalized and disadvantaged groups (Yadav & Sharma, 2018; UIL, 2020; NITI Aayog, 2023).

Freire (1970) reminds us that education is either a form of liberation or one of domestication. The hope of ULLAS - Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society - is commensurate with India's constitutional commitment to equality and social justice. The realization of these hopes will not depend on our policy documents but on the political will to resource, institutionalize and hold accountable the systems and structures to ease lifelong learning at all levels.

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