

# **Envisioning Equitable Higher Education through the Lens of Muslim Minority Girl' Students: the Challenges and Concerns *per se* NEP 2020 Context**

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## **ABSTRACT**

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is the commitment of the Government of India to “transform the educational landscape of the country”. In India, on a national average there is skewed male-female gender disparity in education (84.7 per cent male literacy rate vs 70.3 per cent female literacy rate). Hence girls remain vulnerable to the gender-disparity gap and Muslim girls are at the core of this doldrum Statistics indicate that the Muslim minority community falls far below the national average in terms of their education prowess (80.6 per cent male literacy rates and 68.8 per cent female literacy rates at the higher education level). This is glaring from the perspective of access and equity to higher education and eventually to a high rate of human development index. The United Nations (UN) has declared Education as one of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Muslim Minority girls lack systemic representation at the higher education level even at general education (Sachar Committee Report, 2006). The aim of the paper is to explore the changing dynamics of the education world through the lens of Muslim minority girl students. The paper attempts to unveil the concerns and challenges of higher education among Muslim minority girl students, *per se* some of the salient features of NEP 2020 at Higher education in the context of diversity and equity.

**Key Words :** Equity, inclusion, Challenges, Concerns, Muslim Minority girls

## **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, in the struggle for India's independence the middle class along with the political elites fought for a free India. Education has always been viewed as a liberating force and a vehicle for human development. Amartaya Sen in his path-breaking theory signified the “human -capability” approach and that every human being-has the potential for growth provided the right “push” is thrust. In the Indian context, right from Independence, policies and programmes based on social welfare backdrop has been in the offing to her much diverse demographics. India is perhaps the most plural of all the democracies in the world where peoples of different faiths co-exist: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees,

Christians, Jain among others co-exist. Education, being the greatest leveller of all in terms of a human being's growth potential, the multifarious education policies and programmes at different levels of education: from school education to higher education has revealed mixed results. The literacy rate is an indicator of the attainment of literacy of an individual, or community. The literacy rates among different religious groups in India vary as revealed in the statistics (Census, 2011) reflecting inequity in educational attainment in terms of access, enrolment and learning outcomes. To address these concerns and bring about uniformity and commonality in terms of educational access and opportunities, Government of India has come out with the National Educational Policy 2020 with unique features that emphasizes concerns of equity, diversity

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and inclusion amidst India's diverse population.

### Need of the study:

NEP 2020 is a much sought after and a comprehensive policy document in 21<sup>st</sup> century India. After all, this is the first policy document which outlines the four-year under-graduate programme of study aimed to put India at par the global standards of practice. It also emphasizes skill-based education based on market demands of contemporary and futuristic employment trends. Relating to this is also the multiple entry and exit options stretching from certificate, diploma, degree and degree with research programmes of study. This sounds promising as policy perspective but it also leads to questioning the equitable nature of education in terms of accessibility and affordability, especially at the Higher education level. India is the most plural State in the world, perhaps, considering its vast and rich demographic profile in terms of multi-lingual, multi-religious nature of its population.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a flagship programme of the Government of India as it purports to transform the educational landscape of our country. The aim of the paper is to explore the changing dynamics of the education world through the lens of Muslim minority girl students. Statistics indicate that the Muslim minority community falls far below the national average in terms of their education prowess. As per Census 2011, the literacy rate of Muslim males stands at 80.6 per cent (combined rate for rural and urban population); the literacy rate of female students is placed at 68.8 per cent (combined literacy rate for rural and urban population) as against the national rate of 84.7 per cent for male students and 70.3 per cent for female students at the national level. This is glaring from the perspective of access to higher education and eventually to a high rate of human development index. Muslim Minority girls lack systemic representation at the higher education level even at general education. Data pertaining to Muslim Minority girls' representation at (STEM) education is patchy. Research indicates the inter-generational vicious cycle of poverty for the ones who lack in education and hence the spill-over effects related to an education that is beneficial remain bereft to such a demographic profile. The paper attempts to unveil the concerns and challenges of higher education among Muslim minority girl students in the context of diversity and equity of NEP 2020. It is the need of the hour as the

"transformation of the educational landscape" will not be complete without equitable representation of Muslim Minority Girl students in education and nation-making. It will be a skewed nation, ironically opposite to the concept of "Sabka Saath, Saka Vishwas, Sabka ....". Women have been vulnerable to the gender-disparity gap and Muslim girls are at the core of this doldrum. Hence the significance of the study is paramount.

### Research Questions:

How equity and diversity as outlined in NEP 2020 under Higher education is viewed from the perspective of Muslim Minority girl students? How some of the features of NEP 2020 that promises to transform the educational landscape create meaning for the educationally backward most marginalized section of the population?

### Objectives :

The study contains the following objectives:

1. To study how some of the salient features of NEP 2020 create meaning in the lives of Muslim Minority girl students *vis-à-vis* the concept of equity and diversity.
2. To study the challenges and concerns of some of the salient features of NEP 2020 as perceived by Muslim Minority girl students
3. To provide few suggestions regarding the way forward in addressing some of the challenges and concerns faced by Muslim Minority girl students.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive research method of the qualitative paradigm.

### Population:

All Muslim Minority Girl students studying in Universities of Delhi-NCR formed part of the population.

### Sample:

40 Muslim Minority girl students from two universities of Delhi- NCR formed part of the sample. The students were studying in various programmes of study both at the under-graduate and post-graduate level. It is significant to note that the students studying in both the sampled universities are representative of various

states of India, of both urban and rural localities. Hence, the sample is representative of a heterogeneous group but having more or less similar socio-economic profile as the education of all the sampled students were funded by their parents. Moreover, the sampled universities are central / state government universities.

### Demographic profile of the students:

The following profile of students consisted the sample.

Sr. No.	3-year Undergraduate programme of Study students	4-year Undergraduate programme of study students	Masters' programme of study students	I year PG programmes of Study students	Ph. D students
1	10	6	12	6	6
N = 40 students					

### Tools / techniques used in the study:

A questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. Focused group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with two groups of students: one group from each University formed part of the FGDs. Each group had about 6-7 members and duration were about 30-35 minutes.

### Findings:

- ***“Multiple entry and Exit scheme of higher education.....promising .....continue support to higher education.....challenges galore”***

The MEES has generated mixed responses from the sampled students. 60 per cent of students feel that the scheme of opting out at the end of each academic year with any certifications etc. will seal the career progression of many students. Reasons put forth indicated that “our parents may not allow us to pursue the next level of programmes”, or “after we leave a programme of study in between it may be difficult to join back after years of gap”, few others also responded that “if we get an employment after completion of any level of programme then our readiness to leave work and join studies again may not be encouraging to us”. 10 per cent of students also mentioned, “that the curriculum might change once they leave the course and a kind of reciprocity with their prior knowledge” might arrest or be a barrier to their re-joining further studies.

It was striking that 50 per cent of students quoted “re-joining education or going for further studies will be thwarted by the prospect of marriage and lead to

disruption in continuing their education”

Gender equality is fundamental to creating an inclusive, progressive and sustainable society. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Over the years, there has been greater representation of women in different fields of life. However, the responses of the girl students indicate that there is a fear about gender disparity in terms of continuing their education at the higher level and the fear of being able to navigate through life with uncertainty. This is telling in itself about strong robust mechanisms to address such challenges and mitigate their fears.

- ***“Elitist education.... Withdrawal of State Funding”***

30 per cent of students perceived that the “concept of Multiple Entry and Multiple Exit (MEME) of NEP 2020” would create a “situation” leading to “dissonance in society” which may “be reflected” as “students who opt out after a year or so due to whatever reasons” will end up with “Certification” or “Diploma” as the “Multiple entry and multiple exit also is aimed at attracting the youth towards employment”. This “may later lead to employment frustration” as “students may feel they decided for job too quick...without completing their education.....or with lesser skills” Elite sections of society who as Bourdieu propounded, have access to “Social Capital”, “Cultural Capital” and “Symbolic Capital” by way of going ahead with “higher education”, “as personal financial means make it possible” will be able to secure for themselves the sources of knowledge and production of knowledge. Only a select few would be at an “advantage position” and “would be at helm of affairs”, “control the disadvantaged” and “contribute in the creation of a society not based on Constitutional Values of Justice and Equality”. In the face of “State withdrawal of funding of higher education” the traditionally and historically marginalized, “would never be able to aspire for an education which is essentially a middle class dream to acquire higher and more education” which they emphasised “is a means of achieving equity and leverage with the privileged class”. Students from traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged communities who are pushed out of the higher education system due to lack of access to the same will be doubly disadvantaged.

- ***Critical thinking.....bereft of decision - making skills***

The responses of the students indicated that skill-

based courses focused only on the practice level curricular areas and so the deeper engagement with higher forms of knowledge practice like Synthesis, evaluation, reflection (Bloom's taxonomy of Learning) will be missing. Here the students need to be counselled that skill-based courses have a different focus and the curriculum courses have a different focus. Industry -ready courses are planned to be designed to be skill intensive focusing more on application of skills. This leaves room for providing counselling to students.

- ***Student and parent friendly: Green signal not so easy to come by .....***

The NEP 2020 in terms of guiding and supporting students and parents the respondents mentioned “the policy may guide numerous students and parents by promising many features which makes it do-able, feasible and points towards employment immediately after a year or two of college”. This was said in context to “disciplinary” and “multi-disciplinary” nature of taking up general Higher Education courses: “major” and “minor”. However, most of the students felt concerned that “the NEP 2020 offers a plethora of options, selection between and among “major” and “minor”, but it “builds confusion” over the “information on programmes of study, choice of courses/ electives, future education opportunities for re-joining after gap years”, which more than 70 per cent said, “it may be years before a girl/ women candidate may get a green signal to pursue education as a second chance and especially, at the Higher education level”

- ***Blended learning and online ...offline learning.....remote...basic accessibility .....unable to afford***

In terms of the “use of the Blended learning approach and use of technology” the respondents mentioned “about widespread socio-economic discrimination in terms of access to technology and its usage will be visible” and also more than 40 per cent responses indicated that “a sharp divide in terms of availability and ownership of gadgets will be sharply pronounced”. Moreover, almost all students responded that “feasibility will be a strong contender to the success of all technology related programmes” as “the level of arrangements and infrastructure needed for technology penetration from primary to higher education will be massive”. The concern stemmed from the fact that India is now almost higher than China in terms of its population. Responses indicated that equitable engagement of technology is certainly an area of concern. Students also

responded that “using technology is not a concern but how and where it will be used and how in terms of resources and funding is needed”. The responses also indicated that “students are very keen on embracing technology and certainly see blended learning as the technology to be in practice in future”.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Responses of students indicated that effect of critical thinking among students through skill-based courses may be an area of concern as critical thinking is a prime skill covered under 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of WHO. After all, research by (Sharma, 2022) indicates that critical thinking and critical pedagogy can be used as a measure to bring about change in the education process. The students are apprehensive about the usefulness of Academic bank of Credits and lack clarity about its implementation. Using different combination of subjects as Major/ Minor will have to be clearly spelled out and students will need to be counselled. It is also a positive aspect that students are aware of the significance of the major features of National Education Policy 2020 but need support and guidance about how it should be / may be / can be aligned to their lives and careers.

In terms of usage of technology and penetration of Blended learning Muslim Minority students are welcoming and appreciative of its necessity stating “technology is the future...we need more and more of technology...but everyone should have access to it...irrespective of any geographical location”. However, the Un statistics reports that “remote learning remains out of reach for at least 500 million students”. ([unstats.un.org/SDGs/report/2020](https://unstats.un.org/SDGs/report/2020)). Different parts of the country and different sections of society faced the impact differently, especially in times of pandemic.

Blended learning is a double -edged sword as the policy promises equitable learning opportunities whereas the implementation aspect is certainly contentious as the risk of affordability and accessibility to even basic technology is an area of prime concern. But sustainable measures are to be in place for effective penetration of technology from basic to high should be affordable for all sections of society.

### Way forward:

Some strategies may be suggested for way forward to bridge the gap and address issues of fear and deprivation amidst the Muslim Minority Girls towards their

equitable representation in Higher education

– ***Massive awareness building***

Awareness and guidance by offering a plethora of information on different courses, careers, admissions, overseas education in global context, about various subject combinations, exams, establishing equivalence etc. may be planned and provided to mitigate their concerns and provide them a way forward to welcome the policy and apply it to their lives.

– ***Capacity building mechanisms for technology and digital literacy***

Capacity building measures should be robust and continuous to tackle the newer and emerging technologies. If timely support and guidance in the form of workshops, seminars, etc or facilitation through self-directed learning, per learning and being member of professional learning bodies are needed. Education and guidance is also needed for being cyber savvy and cyber alert to keep oneself free from being cyber victims.

– ***Wellness and mental health programmes for their adjustment***

As more usage of technology is in practice or will be demanded in future the digital well-being of students becomes paramount. The mental, social and emotional attachment and interpersonal relationship building will be crucial to counter the ill-effects of too much technology penetration.

– ***Constituting Equal Opportunity Commissions*** to look into grievances of deprived groups as recommended by Sachar Committee, 2006. The fear and lack of guidance as reflected by students through their “naïve responses” that they are unaware about many educational opportunities and careers -in -demand. Such matters and matters pertaining to their health, safety is to be taken up at the institutional level for better cognizance of their problems and concerns. **The special education zones** may also be planned

as part of the process to tackle issues and concerns of Muslim Minority girl students.

**Conclusion:**

India has set up an ambitious goal of becoming a global economic super power by 2025. Hence education of all its “demographic Dividend” has to be of primary concern. Getting a workforce with education and skills is certainly a necessity towards moving in the direction of becoming a global economic superpower. Hence, the concerns and issues of Muslim Minority Girls will need addressing as a step in the direction of moving towards a global cause with the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as part of “sabka Saath, sabka Vikas” slogan. Understanding the differences in literacy rates among different religious dividends, more specifically Muslim Minority girls at the level of higher education translates to denial and lack of access to public education and its benefits.

**Implications:**

The study has the following implications:

- Massive awareness -building needed at the community level to address issues pertaining to accessibility and hone in the significance of acquiring higher education among the minority girls.
- At the policy level, more target specific policies may benefit Muslim minority girl students to have a choice -based education

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