



The Architecture of Women's Educational Equity: Historical Impediments and the Strategic Interventions of NEP 2020 in India

**Ajay Krishna, Ph.D., Department of Ancient Indian History Culture & Archaeology
P.M.S.College, Bihar Sharif, Bihar, INDIA**

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

Ajay Krishna, Ph.D.

E-mail : itrsharif02@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

Received on : 06/02/2026
Revised on : 09/04/2026
Accepted on : 18/04/2026
Overall Similarity : 03% on 10/04/2026



Plagiarism Checker X - Report

Originality Assessment

3%

Overall Similarity

Date: Apr 10, 2026 (06:32 AM)
Matches: 84 / 2950 words
Sources: 11

Remarks: Low similarity detected, consider making necessary changes if needed.

Verify Report:
Scan this QR Code



ABSTRACT

The women's education landscape in India is a deep mirror to the country's overall socio-political development, marking a transition from ancient inclusivity to entrenched marginalization and, finally, a struggle for reclaiming it over the past century. This trajectory is not just a historical timeline of literacy percentages but a multifaceted tale of power, resistance, and transformation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 comes at a pivotal point in this journey, trying to shatter the age-old impediments that have existed for millennia. Through the incorporation of gender as a horizontal agenda and the recognition of the intersectionality of caste, religion, and geography, NEP 2020 aims to convert the entire education system from an elitist tool to a tool of universal emancipation. To grasp the revolutionary possibilities of modern policies, it is imperative to examine the historical roots of educational exclusion and the revolutionary struggles that made way for modern-day reforms.¹

KEY WORDS

Architecture, Women, Education, Strategic Interventions, NEP 2020.

Historical Background: From Vedic Inclusion to Colonial Resistance

The course of women's education in India's past is marked by a "Golden Age" in ancient times, which was followed by a period of decline in the medieval age. Spanning over 1,000 years from 1500 BC to 500 BC, the Vedic period represents a unique period in the history of the world with respect to gender and education, in that women were not clearly distinguished from men when it came to obtaining an education. Women in this time period enjoyed very high social statuses and were allowed to pursue higher knowledge, and some were initiated into the Upanayana ceremony just like men. According to the Vedic traditions, women

scholars were either Brahmavadinis or Sadyodvahas. The Brahmavadinis were those women who made a commitment to the study of philosophy, theology, and religion throughout their lives and dedicated their lives to spiritual and intellectual pursuits often without marrying. Examples of Brahmavadinis include Gargi Vacaknavi and Maitreyi. The women who fell under the category of Sadyodvahas would study until they were married, typically by the ages of fifteen or sixteen, focusing on both the Vedas and on artistic fields (including dance and music). The existence of female sages and their hymns contained in the Rig Veda indicates that education in ancient India was available to women, and that marriage was not a barrier to an adequate amount of foundational education. Women also continued to receive educational support during the subsequent Buddhist Era (approx. 560 BC to 200 BC) when many affluent women were able to study philosophy and advanced subjects. Additionally, there were many women of affluence within the Buddhist Era who were very talented educators, and in some cases, who traveled abroad to spread their teaching.²

This egalitarian structure of society began to break down at about 500 BC. The reason that the equality of society eroded is that the patriarchal legal structure emerged through rigid legal systems like the Manusmriti and the various dharmashastras. With the introduction of laws restricting women's rights to participate in the Upanayana ceremony (initiating a boy into the study of the Vedas), women were effectively denied the ability to study the Vedas or recite any of the sacred mantras. Another major impediment was the social institution of child marriage (often at the age of 8-9), which deprived most girls of a formal education before it began. The medieval period of women's education reached its low point and is often referred to as the Dark Ages. Many women were restricted in their movements through the enforcement of the Purdah system and frequent invasions. As a result, formal education primarily ceased to exist for the majority of women, while the education of women became highly stratified. Educated women who belonged to the ruling or noble classes, such as Raziya Sultan and Gulbadan Begum, received a thorough education in the subjects of literature and administration.

Post-Independence Educational Policies: Institutionalizing Equity

In 1947, on the occasion of independence from British rule, the literacy rate in India was very low at 14 percent overall; only 8 percent of females were literate. After independence, the Government of India made a concerted effort to improve that situation through various policy reforms, including the development of a "National System of Education" (NSE), which was specifically designed to address issues of inequities based on sex and region and promote nation-building. The first half of the post-independence period (1951 to 2000) was characterized by a series of five-year plans developed specifically to achieve universal access to education. The 1st five-year plan, which ran from 1951-56, introduced the concept of "social education" as a means of improving literacy and social consciousness. These plans also aimed to address educating women. For example, The University Education Commission (1948-49) established by Dr. Radhakrishnan recommended³ that educating women would allow for the transformation of society, and the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) established by Dr. Mudaliar recommended that the types of courses offered to students be diversified and include Home Science courses for that girls would be eligible to participate in those programs. The National Committee on Women's Education was a committee developed in 1958-59 and chaired by Durgabai Deshmukh. The committee recognized that the education of girls was very important to creating equity between boys and girls and that specific measures should be taken in order to ensure equity in education between boys and girls as a "major issue." The committee recommended that a National Council for the Education of Girls be established, and a woman should be appointed as Joint Director of Education in every state so that she could oversee the education of females.⁴

The 19th-Century Reformist Movement: Education as Resistance

The colonial era introduced a formalized education system that was initially geared toward producing a class of intermediaries for British administration. However, this period also witnessed the emergence of indigenous social reformers who recognized education as the ultimate tool for challenging the dual hierarchies of caste and gender. This era saw the transition of education from a privilege of birth to a tool of resistance against colonial and patriarchal status quos.

The Revolutionary Collaboration of Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh

The year 1848 is a significant year in the history of women's education in India due to the establishment of the Pune Girls School by Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule. Education for women and lower-caste individuals was

opposed by those who made up the “elite boycott gang,” and was fundamentally an act of social resistance. Savitribai, credited with being the first female teacher in India, was subjected to extreme persecution by the orthodox community, including having her hands and feet covered with stones and cow dung as she walked to school. Violence of this nature is evidence of the belief among many that educating women would bring about God’s wrath and terminate families’ lineages.

Fatima Sheikh is a vital figure in the Phule’s efforts toward female education, being recognised as the first Muslim female teacher in India. When the Phules were ostracised from their family and community, Fatima and her brother Usman Sheikh offered them shelter in their own home to start the “Indigenous Library,” which operated as an educational institution for girls. Their partnership is an example of cross-cultural collaboration against patriarchal and caste-based oppression.

Colonial Policy and the Slow Institutionalization of Female Schooling

While indigenous reformers pushed for radical change, British colonial policy moved more tentatively. The Wood’s Despatch of 1854 is often cited as a landmark, as it formally recognized women’s education and provided for grant-in-aid to private schools. However, the primary aim of colonial education remained the production of clerks and administrators, a goal that largely excluded women from the official job market. The legacy of this era was a system that provided access to knowledge but often reinforced social hierarchies by tying advancement to English-language proficiency and academic education accessible only to the urban elite.

NEP 2020: A Paradigm Shift Toward Inclusive Excellence

NEP 2020 is a detailed strategic plan to make India a “Global Centre of Knowledge” by transforming the rigid, exam-dominated school system from the old to the new, replace the traditional 10+2 education system with a new learning system called the “5+3+3+4 Model”, and the development of early childhood care and education (ECCE) for children aged 3-6 years. ECCE was, until now, not part of legislative policy and not formally recognised in the education system. By providing ECCE services for young girls, the NEP 2020 will help to address the issue of lack of cognitive stimulation often received prior to age 6, and by supporting working mothers through the provision of safe and structured learning environments for their children, the NEP 2020 is supporting the promotion of foundational literacy and numeracy throughout India, and creating the basis for long-term success for girls. The establishment of a new shift from rote learning to competency-based learning will help support the development of critical thinking and creativity in children and help combat the historic view of the previous 1986 NEP as being “too much content” which has led to inadequate intellectual empowerment in India.

The Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) is set up to provide funding to improve girl’s education through grants. The GIF has two types of grants, formula and discretionary, and is administered through Samagra Shiksha 2.0 to improve education for all. The formula grants provide funds to implement important items like bicycles, sanitation and conditional cash transfers, while discretionary grants are available to implement community interventions that address specific socio-cultural barriers. Resources allocated for the SEDG will be used to build the needed infrastructure to support menstrual hygiene management and continue reducing absenteeism for young girls, such as building separate bathrooms for girls, providing incinerators and vending machines for sanitary napkins.⁵

The policy additionally intends to extend and upgrade the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs), the residential schools for girls from disadvantaged sections of society and particularly the SC, ST, OBC, and BPL communities. These will transition from being Type- I (Class I- V) to Type-II (Class VI to X) and Type- III (Classes VI to XII) schools as per NEP 2020. The goal of the upgrade is to prevent drop-out of girls after elementary school because there is no local secondary school offering them safe access to education at the next level. To complement this, vocational education will begin in Grade 6 and will include practical experience gained by doing internships and apprenticeships. By eliminating the “hard separation” between vocational and academic streams, the policy aims to reduce the stigma tied to skill development and provide girls with several options for careers in both traditional and emerging fields (i.e., drone assembly, smartphone repair, etc.). The multi-disciplinary approach to education will expand through MEES and ABC at the postsecondary level, allowing women to take a leave of absence from and resume their studies with validating certificates. As a result, these systems will provide a critical safety net for women who may need to interrupt their education because of their marriage or family duties.⁶

The NEP 2020 has an overall goal of transforming education in India to eliminate gender inequality and to ensure that all students can thrive regardless of their gender or background. Part of this vision includes teacher sensitization programs that promote the use of gender sensitive pedagogies, and inclusive curricula have been developed to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The NEP 2020 seeks to achieve this vision through the use of many different interventions, thereby moving beyond binary gender norms and recognizing that there are transgender and non-binary individuals. The ultimate goal of the NEP 2020 is to create an educational environment in which every student can thrive regardless of who they are or what their experiences have been.

The Rural-Digital Complex in Bihar: A Statistical Snapshot

Bihar is essential for examining how poverty combined with low levels of literacy and the power of patriarchal norms results in something called “digital exclusion”. While there is much talk about a “Digital India” at the national level, women from rural areas in Bihar are much further behind their male counterparts and urban counterparts than they should be.

The digital divide for rural women in India is not just about infrastructure, but also about having the “gendered inequality” that restricts access to job opportunities, limits the ability for economic mobility and limits access to important services like telemedicine. The digital divide has the potential to reverse many years of progress made in getting girls into school as education is moving towards more and more use of technology-based formats (an issue which has been accelerated by COVID-19).⁷

Case Studies of Innovation and Targeted Interventions

Successful implementations of gender-sensitive education have to go beyond top-down mandates, and use innovative and community-based models to meet the unique needs of children and communities identified in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The Unnayan Bihar Project: Technology for Scaling Quality

The Unnayan Bihar Project, an initiative of the Government of Bihar, was launched in 2019 as a part of the Government’s Technology for Scaling Quality Schooling initiative. As a part of this initiative, the Government is using digital technology, including the development of Smart Classrooms and a new learning app called “Mera Mobile Mera Vidyalaya,” to scale access to good school education for rural children.

- **Increased Learning Outcomes:** The number of students passing the Class 10 board examination in the first division increased from 2.90 lakh (290,000) students in 2018-19 to 4.03 lakh (403,000) students in 2019-20.
- **Safety and Inclusion:** All Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) in the state of Bihar⁸ have been equipped with CCTV surveillance systems, biometric attendance systems and a number of other safety and security initiatives to improve the profile of schooling (education) through residential education, which is a major factor for parents when they make the decision to send their daughters to live in a residential school.
- **Identification and Re-enrolment of Out of School Children (OOSC):** Over 9 lakh OOSC were identified by the State during the 2021-2022 academic year, and re-enrolled through various campaigns and initiatives, including specialized re-enrolment campaigns and non-residential training programs which were used successfully by the State.

The Educate Girls Model: Community Ownership

The Social Enterprise Educate Girls is implementing this model in districts in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh where community and local leaders are mobilized to form partnerships with local Governments to reform the current educational delivery system. Community-based youth leaders (“Team Balika”) are developed as champions of girls’ education and their leadership skills are enhanced. School management committees are trained in reducing gender disparity in school infrastructure. The use of Child Centric and Creative Learning has been the approach utilized to implement this program.

Over 90% of targeted girls are successfully enrolled in school, with 85% of girls staying in school after being enrolled. There is an increase of 25%-40% overall in the learning outcomes of these girls in the subjects of Hindi, English and Math. The findings from this model demonstrate that for every \$5 spent annually on girls’ education through this model, a girl will be returned to the educational system. The return on investment from the community-led interventions is shown to be very high.⁹

Comparative Analysis: From NPE 1986 to NEP 2020

The change from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020 shows a major shift in the way that the state of India approaches gender. NPE 1986 wanted to “Equalize Opportunity” and reduce Inequities, while NEP 2020 says that Inclusion is the most important “Cross-Cutting” priority for the 21st Century.

1. **Structural Inclusivity:** NEP 2020 establishes a new student structure of 5 + 3 + 3 + 4, which consists of three years of preschooling (Anganwadi), recognizing that preschool is critical for later cognitive development and that many women could not get an education because of the lack of opportunity.
2. **Breadth of Gender:** While previous policies referred only to two genders (boy or girl), NEP 2020 refers to all genders, including transgender and non-binary.
3. **Pedagogical Shift:** The NPE 1986 has been criticized for an approach that is “examination-centred” and “content-heavy.” In contrast, the NEP 2020 emphasises a competency-based approach to learning that allows for flexibility across subjects—particularly between vocational and academic streams—while eliminating traditional barriers between the subjects of Arts, Science, and Commerce.

CONCLUSION

The progress of women’s education in India is a story of perseverance against systemic barriers. Historically, there have been high academic standards that existed during the Vedic period many Mohenjo-Daro women were scholars called Brahnavadinis. Throughout history, women have been champions of women’s literacy to ensure justice for society; for example, Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh were revolutionary women leaders that fought for female education. Since India gained independence, laws were created to facilitate free education, including statutes passed in 1968 and 1986; however, NEP 2020 has provided the most comprehensive overview of achieving gender equality in digital age education in India.

The NEP 2020 has addressed the root causes of dropouts’ propensity toward poverty, safety issues, and sociocultural constraints through the establishment of the Gender Inclusion Fund and Special Education Zones. The data from rural Bihar provides evidence that digital exclusion is now the latest barrier. Whether gender equity can be achieved in India now depends on how effectively state leaders implement Samagra Shiksha 2.0, using innovative community-based models such as the Unnayan Bihar project and the Educate Girls initiative. By utilizing a collaborative multi-sectoral approach that includes addressing physical safety, providing economic provision, and ensuring digital literacy, Indian leaders can continue the legacy of past reformers, creating an inclusive education environment where every child can be educated, regardless of race or ethnic group.

REFERENCES

1. Devi, Rameshwari & Pruthi, Romila (eds.) (1998) *Women and the Indian Freedom Struggle: Annie Besant*. Pointer Publishers, Jaipur.
2. Forbes, Geraldine (1996) *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
3. University Education Commission, Government of India, Report of the University Education Commission (1948-1949), The Radhakrishnan Commission, New Delhi.
4. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, National Policy on Education 1986 1986, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi.
5. Baldevbhai, Ashokkumar (2024) Reform and Reality: NEP 2020 vs. NPE 1986 in the Context of Indian Education, *Sodha Samagham* 7(4), 741.
6. Chandra, Lekha (2018) *Making “Ideal” Indian Women: Annie Besant’s Engagement with the Issue of Female Education in Early Twentieth-Century India*, Paedagogica Historica, Abingdon, UK.
7. Bihar Education Project Council, Annual Report 2021-2022 (2022).
8. Bihar Education Project Council, Annual Report 2021-2022 (2022).
9. World Bank (2018) *Educate Girls: Improving the Quality and Outcomes of Girls’ Learning*, Public Disclosure Authorize, Washington, D.C.
