



From Policy to Practice: Challenges of NEP-2020 in Rural Higher Education Institutions of Kandhamal District, Odisha

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ABSTRACT:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reflects a holistic reform initiative targeted at transforming India's higher education system by fostering equity, equality, inclusiveness, flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, holistic education, digital integration, and research orientation etc. Although the policy is forward looking and positive progressive vision there are still remains some significant challenges especially in rural and tribal regions. This paper examines the challenges of NEP 2020 implementation in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district, Odisha. Here the researcher adopts qualitative descriptive approach based on policy analysis, secondary data and open-ended interviews in the local set up of rural higher education Institution. This study identifies major challenges such as digital divide, infrastructural inadequacy, faculty shortage, socio-economic constraints, linguistic diversity, weak research culture, Lack of communication, poor in local awareness, governance limitations, and financial constraints. The findings of the study highlight a significant gap between policy objectives and ground zero (grass root)-level realities of the rural and tribal area higher education of Kandhamal. It is evident from this study that context-sensitive, equity-driven, and district-specific need-based implementation strategies are very crucial to accountable that NEP 2020 leads to fruitful higher education reform in rural and tribal regions.

Key words

Policy to practice, Challenges, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Rural Education, Higher Education, Kandhamal District, Odisha

I. INTRODUCTION

In 21st century, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) marked as a transformative moment in the history of Indian education. After more than three decades since the 1986 National Policy on

Education, NEP-2020 visualised a comprehensive restructuring of the educational landscape from early childhood care education (ECCE) to higher education (HE) grounded

in the principles of access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability. It introduces multidisciplinary institutions, academic flexibility through multiple entry and exit systems, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), institutional autonomy, research promotion through the National Research Foundation (NRF), and improve use of technology. While the policy articulates a progressive and inclusive vision, the translation of these reforms into practice presents complex challenges, particularly in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged regions. Kandhamal district of Odisha represents one such context where policy aspirations intersect with ground realities. Predominantly rural and tribal in demographic composition, Kandhamal faces persistent developmental constraints including limited infrastructure, digital divide, economic marginalisation, linguistic diversity, and restricted access to quality higher education institutions. These contextual factors significantly influence the implementation trajectory of NEP-2020 in the district's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). While the policy emphasizes institutional restructuring, digital integration, research culture, and multidisciplinary learning, rural HEIs often struggle with basic infrastructural deficits, faculty shortages, inadequate funding, and limited academic exposure.

Furthermore, the emphasis on technology-enabled learning, online courses, and digital repositories assumes stable internet connectivity and digital literacy conditions that remain unevenly distributed in Kandhamal's rural landscape. The introduction of flexible curricular frameworks and outcome-based education also requires robust



faculty training, continuous professional development, and administrative preparedness, which are often constrained by resource limitations. Another prime dimension relates to equity and inclusion. NEP-2020 highlights the inclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Tribes and rural learners. In districts like Kandhamal, where a major population belongs to tribal communities, language barriers, first-generation learners' challenges, and financial instability complicate the realization of policy goals. Bridging the gap between policy intent and grassroots implementation therefore necessitates context-sensitive strategies rather than uniform national prescriptions. The administrative ecosystem of rural HEIs often operates within rigid bureaucratic frameworks, making rapid adaptation difficult. Financial constraints further intensify the challenge, as many rural colleges depend heavily on state grants with limited scope for revenue generation or industry collaboration.

Thus, the movement "from policy to practice" is not merely a procedural transition but a complex process shaped by socio-cultural, economic, infrastructural, and institutional realities. Understanding the specific challenges faced by rural HEIs in Kandhamal district is crucial for evaluating the feasibility and sustainability of NEP-2020 reforms in marginalized contexts. This study seeks to critically examine these implementation barriers, identify contextual gaps, and explore pragmatic strategies that can facilitate effective policy translation. By situating NEP-2020 within the lived realities of rural higher education in Kandhamal, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on educational reform, decentralised planning, and equitable development in India's diverse educational landscape.

II. REVIEWS RELATED LITERATURE

The existing literature on the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 highlights a significant gap between policy vision and institutional readiness, particularly in state and rural contexts. The policy document issued by the Ministry of Education (2020) envisions multidisciplinary institutions, academic flexibility, digital integration, and quality enhancement in higher education. However, empirical studies indicate structural and operational constraints. Sahoo (2024) identifies issues of infrastructural inadequacy, faculty shortages, and limited preparedness of higher education institutions in

Odisha. Similarly, Bharali (2024a, 2024b) emphasizes administrative challenges, leadership burden, and the crucial role of teachers and principals in translating policy directives into practice. Praveen et al. (2024) further note systemic barriers such as curriculum restructuring pressures and regulatory transitions that complicate smooth implementation at the institutional level.

Scholarly discussions also underline the digital divide, teacher education reforms, and contextual limitations affecting rural institutions. Chakraborty Acharya (2025) and Rudupra (2025) highlight the need for technological readiness and innovative pedagogical transformation aligned with NEP mandates, while Farooqi et al. (2025) question the practical effectiveness of reforms without adequate ground-level support. Kulal et al. (2024) critically examine both the promise and pitfalls of NEP 2020, arguing that ambitious reforms require localized adaptation. Rathi (2023) presents a visionary outlook toward higher education reform but acknowledges transitional complexities. Collectively, these studies suggest that while NEP-2020 provides a transformative framework, rural higher education institutions—such as those in Kandhamal District, Odisha—face contextual challenges including limited resources, governance constraints, digital access gaps, and capacity-building needs, thereby reinforcing the importance of examining the policy-to-practice transition in rural settings.

III. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

From the reviews related literature, the investigators were found that the National Education Policy 2020 presents a transformative framework for multidisciplinary, flexible, and research-oriented higher education; however, existing literature reveals significant gaps between policy intent and institutional readiness. Studies highlight structural deficiencies, digital divides, faculty shortages, financial constraints, and regulatory ambiguities that hinder effective implementation—challenges that are particularly acute in rural and semi-urban institutions. While learner-centric reforms such as credit mobility and flexible curricula aim to enhance student autonomy and satisfaction, their success depends largely on infrastructural support, trained faculty, and coordinated governance mechanisms.

In the context of rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Kandhamal District, Odisha, these concerns become even more critical due to



geographical isolation, limited technological access, and resource constraints. The district's socio-economic realities may intensify issues of infrastructure, digital preparedness, and capacity building identified in national-level studies. Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the Challenges faced by the Stakeholders to implement NEP 2020 in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district, Odisha.

IV. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

From the above rationale of the study the problem may be stated as “**From Policy to Practice: Challenges of NEP- 2020 in Rural Higher Education Institutions of Kandhamal District, Odisha**”.

V. OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE STUDY

In the context of the study titled “From Policy to Practice: Challenges of NEP-2020 in Rural Higher Education Institutions of Kandhamal District, Odisha,” the key terms are operationally defined as follows:

National Education Policy-2020 (NEP-2020): It refers to the National Education Policy 2020 introduced by the Government of India in 2020, particularly its higher education reforms such as multidisciplinary approach, multiple entry-exit system, Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), institutional restructuring, skill-based curriculum, digital learning integration, and governance reforms.

Policy to Practice: In this study Policy to Practice refers to the extent to which the provisions, reforms, and guidelines of NEP-2020 are actually implemented at the institutional level, measured through indicators such as curriculum restructuring, adoption of credit systems, faculty training, digital infrastructure development, and administrative reforms.

Challenges: It refers to the institutional, administrative, academic, financial, technological, socio-cultural barriers, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified faculty, limited funding, digital divide, lack of awareness, and regulatory constraints that hinder effective implementation of NEP-2020 in Kandhamal District.

Rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Government and government-aided colleges located in rural areas of Kandhamal District,

Odisha, affiliated to state universities and offering undergraduate (UG) and/or post-graduation (PG) programmes.

Kandhamal District: A tribal populated district of Odisha. This study particularly focuses on Rural Higher Education Institutions of Kandhamal district.

VI. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To study the major challenges in implementing the National Education Policy (NEP-2020) in rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Kandhamal district.

VII. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The present study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design for data collection and analysis. The primary objective of the study was to examine the major challenges in implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district.

For this purpose, seven rural higher education institutions from Kandhamal district were selected. The study included a total of 110 participants comprising 20 teaching faculty members, 70 students, 10 local educationists, and 10 local social workers (community members). To identify the major challenges in the implementation of NEP 2020, the researchers employed self-developed open-ended questionnaires, open-ended interviews, semi-structured interviews, field observations, and verbal discussions. Additionally, participants shared their responses through telephone calls, WhatsApp messages, video-call discussions, and email communications. Data were also collected through an analysis of the National Education Policy 2020 document and related government publications, along with a review of secondary literature including research articles, reports, and policy analyses. The findings were further interpreted in light of the socio-educational profile of Kandhamal district. For the analysis of the identified challenges, the researchers adopted a narrative analysis approach for both primary and secondary data.

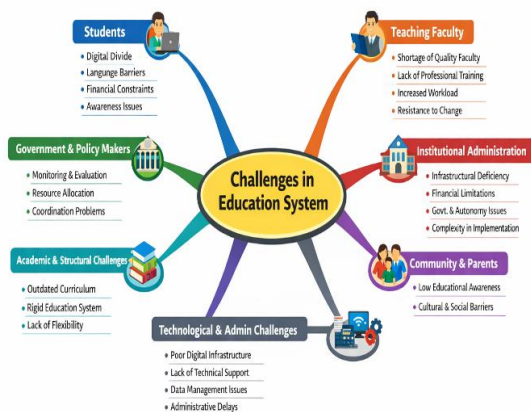
VIII. MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY STAKEHOLDERS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF NEP-2020 IN RURAL HEIS

The transformative implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP-2020) in rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has opened new



avenues for reform. However, stakeholders-such as students, teaching Faculty, parents, and administrators-face various structural, financial, administrative, and socio-cultural challenges. In Kandhamal district, these challenges become more critical due to geographical isolation, a high concentration of tribal populations, and limited institutional capacity. In this context, the researchers present a comprehensive discussion of the major challenges faced by rural HEIs and their stakeholders.

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(A) Challenges faced by Students:

Students of rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face major challenges such as the digital divide, language barriers, financial constraints, and lack of awareness.

- **Digital Divide**

Kandhamal is a rural and hilly district of the state of Odisha. As most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are located in rural and semi-urban areas of the district, students face challenges such as poor internet connectivity and a lack of digital devices. There are not many online platforms available near the HEIs or in the surrounding localities; therefore, students have limited access to online learning platforms and e-resources.

The researchers also found that low digital literacy among first-generation learners is a major issue. This creates significant challenges for students in adapting to and participating effectively in the modern, technology-driven digital age.

- **Language Barrier**

There is no doubt that NEP-2020 promotes multilingualism and the concept of instruction in the mother tongue or regional language. However, in Kandhamal district, quality study materials in tribal and regional languages are not adequately available. In the rural areas of Kandhamal, many students use the Kui language in their daily lives, even while communicating with family members, yet they are unable to receive education in their mother tongue. This has emerged as one of the major challenges for students in adapting to multidisciplinary and skill-based courses.

- **Financial Constraints**

The tribal population of this district primarily depends on forests and seasonal agriculture for their livelihood. Due to limited economic opportunities, rural parents and their children continuously struggle with financial difficulties. The researchers found that most students belong to economically weaker sections of society. Poverty in the rural areas of Kandhamal district is not merely common; it has become a persistent and deep-rooted problem.

As a result, many families are unable to afford admission fees, examination fees, tuition fees, and other essential requirements such as digital devices, hostel facilities, and additional certificate courses for their children. Consequently, students directly face financial constraints as a major challenge. When these financial difficulties intensify and create severe economic pressure, students often feel insecure about their future and are at a higher risk of dropping out. The researchers also found that economic pressure significantly increases the dropout rate.

- **Awareness Issues**

NEP-2020 facilitates the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), the multiple entry-exit system, and the integration of skill-based and vocational education. However, due to inadequate facilitation and limited institutional preparedness for the implementation of NEP-2020, most students do not have proper awareness of these concepts.

(B) Challenges faced by Teaching Faculty

Shortage of quality faculty, lack of professional training, increased workload, and resistance to change are some of the major challenges faced by the teaching faculty of rural Higher Education



Institutions (HEIs) in Kandhamal district. These challenges are described as follows:

- **Shortage of Quality Faculty**

In ground reality, it was found that faculty vacancies are one of the major challenges faced by rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Kandhamal district. Due to the scarcity of faculty members, official work is not completed on time, and academic performance is also adversely affected. This challenge directly and indirectly impacts the existing faculty members, increasing their workload and responsibilities. Furthermore, the government has failed to recruit multidisciplinary and research-oriented human resources in rural Higher Education Institutions. This issue is particularly severe in rural and tribal districts like Kandhamal in Odisha.

- **Lack of Professional Training**

As most rural Higher Education Institutions are not fully government-funded, the government does not provide adequate orientation and support regarding outcome-based education, experiential learning, ICT integration, and exposure to research and innovation. However, NEP-2020 strongly emphasizes the promotion of research and innovation culture as a core domain of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India. Moreover, the government provides very limited support in terms of physical, human, and financial resources to semi-government and private rural Higher Education Institutions in Odisha. Due to these constraints, faculty members in rural Higher Education Institutions do not receive sufficient professional training, which creates significant challenges in the implementation process of NEP-2020.

- **Increased Workload**

The shortage of faculty itself acts as a primary factor contributing to the increased workload in rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Faculty members are required to implement continuous assessment reforms, manage the credit transfer system, introduce skill-based courses, and handle various administrative responsibilities without additional support staff. Consequently, this increased workload becomes a major challenge to the effective implementation of NEP-2020 in rural Higher Education Institutions of Kandhamal district.

- **Resistance to Change**

In the 21st century, the digital era demands not only hard work but also smart work for the overall development of institutions. The traditional lecture-based teaching mind-set is contrary to the objectives of NEP-2020. Nevertheless, conventional practices continue primarily for the completion of the syllabus. Due to the shortage of faculty and lack of proper training, some faculty members hesitate to adopt interdisciplinary approaches and flexible curricula within their institutions. Therefore, this challenge acts as a significant hindrance to the effective implementation of NEP-2020 in rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

- (C) **Challenges Faced by Institutional Administration**

In the rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district, institutional administration faces multiple interconnected challenges in implementing reforms such as National Education Policy 2020. These include severe infrastructure deficiencies like poorly equipped classrooms, laboratories, and libraries, along with the absence of smart classrooms, digital facilities, hostels, and transport services. Financial limitations further restrict the upgradation of facilities, establishment of multidisciplinary departments, and development of research centres, compounded by delays in fund disbursement. Governance constraints also persist, as most rural colleges remain affiliated to state universities with limited academic and financial autonomy, leading to bureaucratic delays in curriculum reforms. Additionally, the complexity of implementing structural changes-such as the four-year undergraduate programme, credit framework, and the Academic Bank of Credits-poses administrative burdens related to documentation, coordination, and compliance.

- (D) **Challenges faced by Government and Policy Maker**

In the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district, the Government and policy makers encounter significant challenges related to monitoring, resource allocation, and coordination. Effective monitoring and evaluation remain difficult due to the remoteness of many institutions and the absence of robust real-time data systems to track progress. Resource allocation is often uneven, with comparatively limited funding directed toward



rural, tribal, and aspirational regions, thereby widening disparities between urban and rural institutions. Furthermore, weak coordination among state higher education departments, affiliating universities, colleges, and regulatory bodies hampers smooth policy execution, resulting in delays, inconsistencies, and fragmented implementation of NEP 2020 objectives.

(E) Challenges for Community and Parents

In the context of From Policy to Practice: Implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 in Rural Higher Education Institutions of Kandhamal district, community- and parent-related challenges significantly influence the policy's effective implementation. Low educational awareness among rural families limits their understanding of higher education reforms, multidisciplinary learning, and long-term academic benefits, often leading to a preference for immediate employment over extended education. Additionally, cultural and social barriers-such as early marriage practices and persistent gender disparities in higher education participation-restrict students, particularly girls, from continuing their studies. These socio-cultural constraints create gaps between policy vision and grassroots reality, thereby affecting enrolment, retention, and overall institutional transformation under NEP 2020.

(F) Academic and Structural Challenges

In the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district, academic and structural challenges remain significant barriers to transformation. Most rural HEIs function as single-discipline institutions, and their conversion into multidisciplinary institutions demands substantial faculty expansion, infrastructure development, and comprehensive curriculum redesign. Research and innovation activities are constrained by limited funding, lack of research mentorship, minimal industry collaboration, and weak exposure to innovation ecosystems. Furthermore, the integration of skill and vocational education is hindered by the absence of strong industry linkages and underdeveloped local skill ecosystems, reducing opportunities for internships and practical training. These structural limitations slow the transition from policy vision to effective practice under NEP 2020.

(G) Technological and Administrative Challenges

In the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal district, technological and administrative challenges further constrain effective execution. Many institutions lack robust Learning Management Systems (LMS) and reliable digital infrastructure, limiting blended and online learning opportunities. Additionally, there is a shortage of adequately trained administrative staff capable of managing digital platforms, policy documentation, and compliance requirements. Maintaining accurate digital student records, credit transfers, and data reporting systems also remains difficult, thereby affecting transparency, efficiency, and alignment with NEP 2020's digital and governance reforms.

In a nutshell, while the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions inclusive, flexible, multidisciplinary, and skill-oriented higher education, rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face multi-layered challenges related to infrastructure, funding, digital access, human resources, governance, and socio-cultural barriers. For the effective implementation of NEP-2020 in rural HEIs of Kandhamal District, there is a need for targeted funding for rural and tribal institutions, capacity-building programmes for teachers, strengthened digital infrastructure, community awareness campaigns, and greater institutional autonomy with accountability. Only through collaborative efforts among all stakeholders can the transformative vision of NEP-2020 become a practical reality in rural higher education institutions.

IX. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Educational Implications of the Present Study as follows;

- The present study will be useful for monitoring the implementation of NEP 2020 and for designing localized teacher training programs in rural Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Kandhamal district.
- The study will help emphasize the need for investment in ICT infrastructure, human resources, and financial support for rural HEIs.



- The proposed study will be helpful in strengthening community-based support systems for rural HEIs.
- The study will assist stakeholders (teachers, parents, community members, etc.) in developing curriculum content that is suitable for the learning styles and contextual needs of the rural higher education system.
- The study will support rural HEI faculty in adopting innovative teaching methods to improve classroom climate and foster a research mindset among students, as highlighted in NEP 2020.
- The study will help policymakers and officials understand the grassroots realities, implementation status, and challenges of NEP 2020 in rural HEIs of Kandhamal district.
- The current study will also contribute to the holistic development of rural HEIs.

X. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following points are the limitations of the current study;

- This study was limited to rural HEIs of Kandhamal district.
- Only 7 sample rural HEIs were considered.
- Only 110 participants comprising 20 teaching faculty members, 70 students, 10 local educationist, and 10 local social workers were taken by the investigators.
- Language barrier may be influenced at the time of data collection in rural HEIs of the Kandhamal district.

XI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the successful transformation of policy into practice under NEP 2020 in rural higher education institutions of Kandhamal District remains a difficult but necessary task. Although the policy promises equity, quality, flexibility and skill-based learning, its implementation is hindered by the digital divide, poor internet and electricity facilities, language barriers between English-medium resources and local learners, financial constraints, low awareness among students and parents, shortage of qualified faculty, lack of professional training, increased workload on teachers, resistance to change, and weak institutional preparedness. Institutional

administrations struggle with inadequate infrastructure, limited autonomy, complex administrative demands and insufficient technological support, while the government and policy makers face challenges in ensuring adequate funding, monitoring, teacher recruitment and region-specific planning. Community members and parents in many rural areas are often unable to support the new educational reforms because of low literacy, poverty and lack of awareness. Academic and structural challenges such as outdated curricula, poor research culture, lack of laboratories, libraries and vocational facilities further widen the gap between policy and practice. Therefore, NEP 2020 can become effective in rural institutions only through greater government investment, improved digital and physical infrastructure, bilingual teaching materials, regular faculty recruitment and professional training, reduction of unnecessary administrative burden, community awareness programmes, stronger collaboration between institutions and local stakeholders, and a phased, locally sensitive implementation strategy suited to the realities of rural Odisha. Additionally, cultural and social barriers such as early marriage practices and persistent gender disparities in higher education participation -restrict students, particularly girls from continuing their studies. These socio-cultural constraints create gap between policy vision and grassroots reality, thereby affecting enrolment, retention and overall rural higher education institutional transformation under NEP 2020.

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