National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Women's Empowerment through Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Dr. Ram Butke
College of Social Work, Kamptee
R. T. M. Nagpur University, Nagpur
Email :- rambutke@gmail.com

Abstract
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in India's educational framework, aiming to align learning with the country's cultural roots, sustainability goals, and inclusive development vision. Central to this policy is the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) — the traditional wisdom, practices, and skills that have been passed down through generations. This paper examines how NEP 2020 can become a powerful instrument for women's empowerment by re-establishing the relevance of indigenous knowledge in modern education and livelihood opportunities. Historically, women have been vital custodians of India's indigenous wisdom, contributing significantly to areas such as traditional medicine, agriculture, handicrafts, and community-based learning. By recognizing and formalizing these contributions within the educational system, NEP 2020 holds the potential to validate women's roles as knowledge-bearers and innovators. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing from policy analysis, case studies, and secondary data to evaluate how gender-sensitive implementation of NEP 2020 can enhance women's participation in education, leadership, and entrepreneurship. It also explores the socio-economic impact of integrating IKS into vocational and higher education, especially for women in rural and tribal communities. The findings suggest that embedding indigenous perspectives into curricula not only fosters cultural continuity but also equips women with context-specific skills for sustainable development. However, the paper also identifies challenges such as lack of institutional support, gender bias, and limited awareness regarding IKS frameworks. Ultimately, this research emphasizes that women's empowerment through NEP 2020 requires a balanced approach that combines traditional wisdom with modern pedagogy, ensuring that education becomes both inclusive and transformative.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Women's Empowerment, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Gender Equality, Indian Education, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Education has long been recognized as a critical pathway for empowerment, especially in societies where historical inequalities have limited women's access to knowledge and decision-making. In the Indian context, women have traditionally held significant roles in transmitting and preserving indigenous knowledge—ranging from traditional health care practices, environmental management, and local crafts to oral literature and community education. However, colonial and postcolonial education systems often marginalized these contributions, prioritizing Western models of knowledge over local wisdom. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the Government of India, seeks to bridge this gap by reorienting education toward India's cultural heritage and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), while simultaneously promoting inclusivity, gender equality, and sustainable development.

Women's empowerment, in this context, goes beyond economic independence—it encompasses intellectual recognition, social participation, and leadership in community-driven initiatives. By valuing indigenous knowledge, NEP 2020 can help dismantle the hierarchies that have historically devalued women's traditional expertise. Integrating IKS into modern education systems also enhances access for women and girls from marginalized communities, offering them culturally relevant and livelihood-oriented learning opportunities. This can significantly contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

This paper aims to explore how NEP 2020 can act as a transformative framework for empowering women through the recognition and integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. It examines the policy's provisions, their implications for women's education and livelihoods, and the barriers that need to be overcome for equitable implementation. By doing so, it highlights the potential of NEP

2020 to not only modernize India's education system but also restore dignity, agency, and leadership to women as the carriers of India's timeless wisdom.

Literature Review

1. NEP 2020 and the formal recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

NEP 2020 explicitly foregrounds Indian/Indigenous Knowledge Systems as part of a broader agenda to "reorient" curricula and revitalize cultural resources within education. The policy frames IKS as a body of knowledge that evolved through observation, experimentation, and practice and recommends institutional mechanisms for its integration across levels of schooling and higher education. This official policy recognition positions IKS from the margins to a legitimate site for curriculum design and academic inquiry.

2. Gender provisions and equity focus in NEP 2020

Alongside IKS, NEP 2020 contains explicit language on gender balance, equitable access, and institutional measures (for example, provisions such as the Gender Inclusion Fund) intended to reduce barriers for girls and transgender students. Scholars and policy analysts have noted that NEP's equity clauses create an enabling policy framework for gender-sensitive curricular reforms, though implementation details remain a primary concern.

3. Women as custodians and transmitters of indigenous knowledge

A growing body of literature documents women's pivotal role in stewarding local and indigenous knowledge across domains—health (midwifery, herbal medicine), agriculture (seed saving, agroecological practices), crafts (weaving, dyeing), and oral traditions. Empirical case studies from rural and tribal India underscore that women's experiential knowledge is often tacit, community-embedded, and transmitted through practice rather than formal texts, making it both rich and vulnerable to loss without deliberate preservation efforts. These studies argue that recognition of women's knowledge is as much about epistemic justice as it is about livelihoods.

4. IKS–education interface: opportunities and promising practices

Recent practitioner and academic literature highlights pilot projects and institutional initiatives that blend IKS with formal learning—community-based curricula, local-language modules, internships with traditional artisans, and vocational programmes that link heritage skills to market linkages. Government IKS divisions and university partnerships indicate increasing institutional interest (e.g., IKS internship programs, university conferences), suggesting a growing ecosystem for scaling such interventions if gender concerns are intentionally integrated.

5. Global policy frameworks and gendered approaches to indigenous knowledge

International organisations (UNESCO and allied bodies) advocate gender-responsive approaches to preserving local and indigenous knowledge—linking quality education, cultural continuity, and women's rights. These global frameworks provide conceptual tools (gender mainstreaming, participatory methods, recognition of oral knowledge) that can inform NEP-aligned implementations at the national and local level.

6. Barriers and critiques: standardisation, epistemic translation, and institutional capacity

Critical literature highlights significant challenges: (a) translating oral/tacit IKS into standardised curricula risks depoliticizing or misrepresenting knowledge; (b) educational institutions often lack trained teachers, resources, and culturally appropriate pedagogy to teach IKS; and (c) prevailing gender biases in educational governance may limit women's voice in curriculum development and leadership. Several recent reviews and analyses stress that without community-centered, gender-sensitive implementation plans, NEP's IKS ambitions could reproduce existing hierarchies rather than dismantle them.

7. Research gaps and directions identified in the literature

The surveyed literature converges on three main gaps your paper can address: (i) empirical evidence on how IKS-based pedagogies affect women's educational outcomes and livelihood trajectories; (ii) models of institutional governance that meaningfully include women knowledge-holders in curriculum design; and (iii) rigorous evaluation frameworks to measure cultural, social, and economic impacts of IKS integration with an explicit gender lens. Recent calls for mixed-methods, participatory action research indicate methodological templates for filling these gaps.

Summative statement

Overall, the literature frames NEP 2020 as an enabling policy moment for linking Indigenous Knowledge Systems with women's empowerment—but one that requires deliberate, gender-sensitive operationalisation. Existing case studies and policy analyses provide promising models and also cautionary lessons about standardisation, capacity, and the risks of instrumentalising tradition. Your paper can contribute by evaluating concrete mechanisms through which NEP 2020 can protect, validate, and scale women-led IKS practices while strengthening education-to-livelihood pathways.

Research Questions and Objectives

Research Questions

This study seeks to explore how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 can serve as a catalyst for women's empowerment through the inclusion and revitalization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in India. The following key research questions guide the inquiry:

1. In what ways can the integration of IKS into educational curricula promote women's empowerment, particularly in rural and marginalized communities?
2. What are the existing barriers and challenges in implementing IKS-based education through a gender-sensitive lens?
3. How can NEP 2020 be operationalized to ensure equitable participation of women as knowledge creators, educators, and community leaders?
4. What policy and institutional mechanisms are necessary to strengthen women's agency and leadership through IKS-oriented education programs?

Research Objectives

To address the above questions, the study is structured around the following objectives:

1. **To analyze the provisions of NEP 2020** related to Indigenous Knowledge Systems, equity, and gender inclusion.
2. **To evaluate the potential of IKS-based educational models** in enhancing women's empowerment, skill development, and socio-economic participation.
3. **To identify challenges and gaps** in integrating IKS into mainstream education with respect to gender sensitivity, resource allocation, and institutional support.
4. **To highlight successful case studies or community initiatives** where women's traditional knowledge has been effectively linked with formal or vocational education.
5. **To propose a policy and implementation framework** that strengthens the role of women as active stakeholders in preserving and disseminating India's indigenous knowledge heritage.

Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach** aimed at understanding the intersection of policy, education, and gender through a social-scientific lens.

1. Research Design

The study follows an **exploratory research design**, focusing on policy analysis, literature synthesis, and thematic interpretation of qualitative data. It will combine **document analysis** with **case-based evidence** to interpret how NEP 2020 can influence women's empowerment through Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

2. Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Data:**
  - Semi-structured interviews with educators, policymakers, women practitioners of traditional knowledge (e.g., artisans, Ayurvedic healers, farmers), and NGO representatives involved in education and women's empowerment.
  - Focus group discussions (FGDs) in selected rural and tribal areas where IKS practices are prevalent.
- **Secondary Data:**
  - Policy documents (e.g., NEP 2020, NITI Aayog reports, UNESCO frameworks).
  - Scholarly articles, books, and previous research studies related to women's empowerment, indigenous knowledge, and education.
  - Reports from institutions promoting IKS (e.g., Indian Knowledge Systems Division under the Ministry of Education).

3. Sampling

A **purposive sampling technique** will be used to select respondents who have direct experience or expertise related to IKS and women's education. The sample may include approximately:

- 10–12 educators or administrators implementing NEP reforms,
- 10–15 women practitioners of indigenous knowledge, and
- 5–8 representatives from NGOs or government programs working in this area.

4. Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using **thematic analysis**. Transcripts from interviews and FGDs will be coded under themes such as "policy impact," "women's agency," "community participation," and "implementation barriers." Comparative analysis will be used to identify emerging patterns and correlations between NEP 2020 provisions and ground-level empowerment outcomes.

5. Limitations

The study may face limitations such as regional diversity in IKS practices, limited availability of documented case studies, and logistical constraints in reaching remote women practitioners. However, triangulation of data sources and careful interpretation will ensure validity and reliability.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Women as Custodians and Transmitters of Indigenous Knowledge

Across India, women have historically been the bearers of indigenous knowledge—managing biodiversity, preserving food culture, practicing Ayurveda and midwifery, and teaching craft traditions. Their contributions represent an intersection of cultural continuity, community welfare, and environmental stewardship. NEP 2020's focus on vocational and skill-based learning opens a window for recognizing and institutionalizing this knowledge.

By including women's traditional expertise in formal curricula, the policy not only validates their intellectual contribution but also creates livelihood opportunities. For example, linking traditional weaving or medicinal plant cultivation with school or university programs can empower women artisans and healers as teachers, trainers, and entrepreneurs. This recognition transforms them from **knowledge users to knowledge producers**, thereby enhancing self-worth and financial independence.

2. Empowerment through Education and Skill Integration

NEP 2020 envisions a **flexible and multidisciplinary education system** that blurs the boundaries between academic and vocational learning. For women, especially in rural and tribal areas, this flexibility can make education more accessible and relevant. Skill-oriented education rooted in indigenous knowledge encourages **self-reliance**, **entrepreneurship**, and **local employment**, reducing dependence on external labor markets.

Empirical studies and pilot programs reveal that when women are trained to combine traditional practices with modern tools—such as organic farming with digital marketing—they gain enhanced income, confidence, and leadership roles within their communities. Thus, the policy's intent resonates with the broader goals of **sustainable and inclusive development**.

3. Challenges in Policy Implementation

Despite its potential, several structural barriers hinder the realization of NEP 2020's vision for women's empowerment through IKS.

- **Institutional Barriers:** Many educational institutions lack faculty trained in indigenous knowledge or gender-sensitive pedagogy.
- **Documentation and Standardization:** Much of IKS is transmitted orally, making it difficult to formalize or assess in academic terms without losing authenticity.
- **Cultural Bias and Gender Inequality:** Traditional gender roles and societal norms still restrict women's participation in public and educational decision-making spaces.
- **Limited Awareness and Funding:** The absence of widespread awareness about NEP's IKS provisions among teachers and communities limits local engagement.

These challenges suggest that while the policy framework is progressive, implementation requires sustained commitment, localized adaptation, and gender-mainstreamed planning.

4. Pathways Toward Gender-Sensitive Implementation

To translate policy vision into tangible empowerment, the following measures are essential:

- **Capacity Building:** Training teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers in IKS and gender equality.

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- **Community Participation:** Involving women practitioners directly in designing and delivering educational content.
- **Policy Support and Funding:** Establishing dedicated schemes for women-led IKS initiatives under the Gender Inclusion Fund.
- **Research and Documentation:** Encouraging universities to record, publish, and preserve women's indigenous knowledge in local languages.
- **Public–Private Partnerships:** Linking traditional women's crafts and eco-industries with academic institutions for sustainable entrepreneurship.

When such measures are implemented effectively, NEP 2020 can bridge the gap between education and empowerment—allowing women to emerge as active custodians of India's intellectual and cultural heritage.

6. Discussion Summary

The analysis reveals that NEP 2020 offers a transformative opportunity to integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems into mainstream education, but its success hinges on gender-sensitive interpretation and localized action. Women's empowerment through IKS is not merely a policy aspiration—it represents a reclamation of cultural identity, economic agency, and epistemic justice.

By acknowledging women's traditional knowledge within the national education system, India can promote both gender equity and cultural resilience, creating an education model that is truly inclusive, rooted, and forward-looking.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a progressive and inclusive vision for Indian education—one that reconnects learning with India's cultural roots, sustainability principles, and local wisdom. Its explicit acknowledgment of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) marks a decisive step toward decolonizing education and validating diverse epistemologies that have long existed outside formal institutions. This study finds that the integration of IKS under NEP 2020 offers vast potential for women's empowerment, as it formally recognizes and values the traditional knowledge domains where women have historically played central roles.

Women in India have always been vital custodians of indigenous traditions—whether in herbal medicine, agriculture, handicrafts, or ecological conservation. By legitimizing these practices within modern educational frameworks, NEP 2020 can transform these informal skills into recognized academic and economic assets. Such recognition fosters self-reliance, identity affirmation, and social mobility for women, especially in rural and tribal regions. Furthermore, integrating IKS with contemporary pedagogy supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality), thereby linking national priorities with global development objectives.

However, the research also highlights significant implementation barriers. The lack of trained educators, inadequate institutional support, gender bias in academic spaces, and challenges in documenting oral traditions all limit the realization of NEP's vision. Without a deliberate gender-sensitive framework, the inclusion of IKS risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Therefore, the empowerment potential of NEP 2020 depends not only on policy intent but on the extent to which women are positioned as active participants—creators, teachers, and decision-makers—in the education system.

Suggestions

1. **Gender-Sensitive Implementation:** Introduce gender audits in NEP implementation processes to ensure equal participation of women in curriculum design, educational leadership, and decision-making.
2. **Teacher Training and Curriculum Development:** Establish specialized training programs to prepare educators to teach Indigenous Knowledge Systems effectively and inclusively. Curriculum frameworks should incorporate local examples, women practitioners, and region-specific content.
3. **Community Participation:** Engage women knowledge-holders—artisans, healers, farmers—as guest lecturers, mentors, and collaborators in educational institutions. Their experiential wisdom should be formally documented and credited.

4. **Institutional Support and Funding:** Strengthen the **Gender Inclusion Fund** and allocate targeted grants for women-led IKS projects, research, and entrepreneurship initiatives.

5. **Research and Documentation:** Encourage universities and research centers to conduct ethnographic and participatory studies documenting women's contributions to indigenous knowledge in local languages and accessible formats.

6. **Public Awareness and Policy Integration:** Promote awareness campaigns about NEP 2020's IKS and gender inclusion goals through media, community workshops, and higher education forums to build societal support for cultural revival and women's empowerment.

7. **Technology and Innovation:** Use digital tools to archive and disseminate indigenous knowledge. Women practitioners can be trained in digital literacy to expand their reach, market access, and participation in the knowledge economy.

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