



THE EVOLUTION OF ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES IN INDIA: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020

Dr. Mozaffar Islam

Assistant Professor, Department of Education,
MANNU College of Teacher Education, Darbhanga, Bihar, India.

Abstract

Adult education has played a vital role in India's socio-economic development by promoting literacy, social inclusion, and lifelong learning among adult populations. Since Independence in 1947, the Government of India has introduced several policies and programmes aimed at reducing adult illiteracy and enhancing educational opportunities for marginalized communities. This study examines the evolution of adult education policies in India from the post-independence period to the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design based on secondary data collected from government reports, policy documents, UNESCO publications, books, and peer-reviewed journal articles. It traces the major milestones in adult education, including the Social Education Programme, National Adult Education Programme (1978), National Literacy Mission (1988), Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009), and the New India Literacy Programme, highlighting their objectives, achievements, and limitations. The paper further analyses how NEP 2020 has redefined adult education by emphasizing foundational literacy, digital competence, vocational skills, financial literacy, and lifelong learning. The findings indicate a significant shift from traditional literacy campaigns toward a comprehensive and learner-centred approach that aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4). Despite notable progress, challenges such as regional disparities, inadequate infrastructure, digital exclusion, and limited community participation continue to hinder effective implementation.

The study concludes that sustained policy support, technological integration, and inclusive governance are essential for strengthening adult education and promoting equitable lifelong learning opportunities across India.

Keywords: Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, National Education Policy 2020, Adult Literacy, National Literacy Mission, Saakshar Bharat, Educational Policy, India, Digital Literacy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4).

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Adult Education

Education has long been recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for individual empowerment and national development. While formal education primarily focuses on children and adolescents, learning does not end with schooling. In a rapidly changing social and economic environment, adults also require continuous opportunities to acquire knowledge, develop new skills, and improve their quality of life. This broader understanding of learning has given rise to the concept of adult education, which has emerged as a significant component of educational policy across the world. In developing countries such as India, adult education has served not only as a means of improving literacy but also as a strategy for reducing poverty, promoting social justice, encouraging democratic participation, and fostering inclusive development (UNESCO, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020).

Since attaining Independence in 1947, India has viewed education as an essential prerequisite for national reconstruction. At the time of Independence, the country faced widespread

illiteracy, particularly among women, rural populations, and economically disadvantaged communities. According to the Census of India (1951), the national literacy rate was only 18.33 percent, reflecting the enormous educational challenges inherited from the colonial period. These conditions prompted the Government of India to recognize adult education as an important policy priority alongside the expansion of school education. Over the decades, several literacy campaigns and educational programmes have been introduced to address the learning needs of adults who were unable to access formal education during childhood (Government of India, 1986; Ministry of Education, 2020).

The philosophy of adult education has gradually evolved from a narrow emphasis on literacy acquisition to a broader vision of lifelong learning. Earlier programmes largely concentrated on teaching adults basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills. However, contemporary educational thinking acknowledges that adults require diverse competencies, including digital literacy, financial literacy, vocational skills, health awareness, environmental education, and civic participation, to function effectively in modern society (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). Consequently, adult education is now understood as a continuous process that enables individuals to adapt to changing technological, economic, and social circumstances throughout their lives.

In the Indian context, adult education has played a particularly significant role in addressing educational inequalities. Large sections of the population, especially women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, migrant workers, agricultural labourers, and other marginalized communities, historically remained outside the formal education system due to poverty, social discrimination, geographical isolation, and cultural barriers. Adult literacy programmes have therefore functioned not merely as educational interventions but also as instruments of social empowerment by enabling individuals to participate more actively in economic activities, democratic institutions, and community development initiatives (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Rogers, 2004).

The importance of adult education has become even more pronounced in the twenty-first century, where knowledge-based economies demand continuous skill development and lifelong learning. Rapid technological advancements, digital transformation, globalization, and changing labour market requirements have created new educational needs that cannot be addressed solely through formal schooling. Recognizing these changing realities, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced a comprehensive framework for adult education by emphasizing foundational literacy, critical life skills, vocational education, basic education, continuing education, and digital learning opportunities. Unlike earlier literacy-centred approaches, NEP 2020 adopts a holistic perspective that seeks to create an inclusive learning society where educational opportunities remain accessible throughout an individual's life (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Against this background, the present study examines the historical evolution of adult education policies in India from Independence to the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020. By tracing the major policy initiatives, identifying their achievements and limitations, and analysing recent reforms, the study seeks to understand how India's approach to adult education has transformed over time in response to changing developmental priorities and emerging educational challenges.

1.2 Meaning and Concept of Adult Education

Adult education refers to the organized process of learning designed specifically for individuals who have crossed the conventional age of formal schooling and seek to acquire new knowledge, improve existing skills, or enhance their personal, social, and professional development. Unlike school education, which generally follows a structured curriculum based on age and grade levels, adult education is flexible, learner-centred, and responsive to the diverse experiences and needs of adult learners. It recognizes that adults possess valuable life experiences and practical knowledge, making the learning process more participatory, problem-oriented, and relevant to everyday life (Knowles, 1980).

The concept of adult education has undergone a significant transformation over the past several decades. Initially, it was largely associated with literacy campaigns aimed at teaching adults the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. These programmes were designed primarily to reduce illiteracy among populations that had been excluded from formal education due to poverty, social inequalities, or limited educational infrastructure. However, as societies became more knowledge-driven and technologically advanced, the scope of adult education expanded considerably. Today, it encompasses a wide range of learning opportunities that include vocational education, digital literacy, financial literacy, health education, environmental awareness, entrepreneurial training, civic education, and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2016).

International organizations have played a significant role in broadening the understanding of adult education. UNESCO defines adult learning and education as all forms of formal, non-formal, and informal learning undertaken by adults to improve their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies throughout life. This definition highlights that education is not limited to childhood or adolescence but is a continuous process that enables individuals to adapt to changing social, economic, and technological environments (UNESCO, 2016). The emphasis on lifelong learning reflects the belief that education should remain accessible to every individual regardless of age, occupation, gender, or educational background.

One of the most influential contributors to the field of adult education is Malcolm Knowles, whose theory of andragogy transformed conventional approaches to adult learning. Knowles (1980) argued that adults learn differently from children because they bring prior experiences, established values, and practical motivations into the learning environment. According to his theory, adult learners are generally self-directed, goal-oriented, and interested in learning that has immediate relevance to their personal or professional lives. Consequently, effective adult education should encourage active participation, practical application, and collaborative learning rather than relying solely on teacher-centred instruction.

Similarly, Paulo Freire (1970) viewed adult education as a process of empowerment rather than merely a mechanism for acquiring literacy skills. He believed that education should enable learners to critically examine their social realities, question existing inequalities, and actively participate in transforming society. Freire's concept of critical consciousness has significantly influenced literacy programmes across developing countries, including India, where adult education has increasingly been linked with social justice, gender equality, and community empowerment.

In the Indian context, the understanding of adult education has evolved alongside national development priorities. During the early decades after Independence, adult education programmes focused primarily on eradicating illiteracy and promoting functional literacy among disadvantaged populations. Over time, government policies recognized that adults require a broader set of competencies to participate effectively in economic development and democratic governance. This changing perspective is clearly reflected in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which identifies five key components of adult education: foundational literacy and numeracy, critical life skills, vocational skill development, basic education, and continuing education. The policy emphasizes that adult education should empower individuals not only to read and write but also to improve their livelihoods, access digital technologies, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to society (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Thus, contemporary adult education extends far beyond literacy acquisition. It represents a comprehensive framework for lifelong learning that promotes personal growth, economic productivity, social inclusion, democratic participation, and sustainable development. In countries such as India, where educational disparities continue to exist across regions and social groups, adult education remains an essential strategy for achieving equitable development and ensuring that no citizen is deprived of learning opportunities due to age or previous educational disadvantage.

1.3 Importance of Adult Education in Nation Building

Education is widely regarded as one of the strongest foundations of national development because it enhances human capabilities, promotes economic productivity, and strengthens democratic institutions. While school education prepares younger generations for future responsibilities, adult education addresses the educational needs of those who were unable to complete formal schooling or who require new knowledge and skills to adapt to changing social and economic conditions. In a country as diverse and populous as India, adult education has become an essential instrument for nation building by improving literacy, reducing social inequalities, promoting inclusive growth, and encouraging active citizenship (UNESCO, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020).

1.3.1 Adult Education and Human Resource Development

A nation's progress largely depends on the quality of its human resources. Educated adults are better equipped to participate in productive employment, adopt modern technologies, and contribute to economic growth. Adult education enables individuals to acquire functional literacy, vocational competencies, and professional skills that improve their employability and income-generating opportunities. As economies become increasingly knowledge-driven, continuous learning has become essential for adapting to technological innovations and changing labour market demands (Knowles, 1980).

In India, adult education has played a significant role in enhancing workforce productivity, particularly among rural populations and workers in the informal sector. Programmes focusing on skill development, financial literacy, digital competence, and entrepreneurship have enabled many adults to improve their livelihoods and become more economically self-reliant. This shift reflects a broader understanding that education is not confined to childhood but remains a lifelong process contributing directly to national productivity and sustainable economic development (Government of India, 2020).

1.3.2 Promoting Social Inclusion and Equality

One of the most important contributions of adult education is its ability to reduce social inequalities by providing educational opportunities to disadvantaged sections of society. Historically, millions of Indians—particularly women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), minority communities, migrant workers, and economically weaker groups—were excluded from formal education due to poverty, discrimination, and geographical barriers. Adult education programmes have offered these communities a second opportunity to acquire literacy and participate more effectively in social and economic life (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

Literacy empowers individuals by increasing their confidence, improving communication skills, and enhancing access to government welfare schemes, healthcare services, banking facilities, and employment opportunities. Educated adults are also more likely to support the education of their children, creating a positive intergenerational effect that contributes to long-term social development. Consequently, adult education functions not merely as an educational intervention but as an instrument for promoting social justice and reducing educational disparities across regions and communities (Rogers, 2004).

1.3.3 Strengthening Democratic Participation

A vibrant democracy depends upon informed and responsible citizens who understand their rights, responsibilities, and constitutional values. Adult education contributes significantly to democratic governance by promoting political awareness, civic responsibility, and active participation in public affairs. Literate citizens are generally better informed about electoral processes, public policies, legal rights, and government programmes, enabling them to make informed decisions and participate meaningfully in democratic institutions (Freire, 1970).

In India, literacy campaigns have often been integrated with awareness programmes on voting rights, gender equality, environmental conservation, health, and community development. Such initiatives encourage citizens to engage actively in local governance,

particularly through Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. Adult education therefore strengthens democratic culture by fostering informed participation, accountability, and community leadership, which are essential for inclusive governance and sustainable development.

1.3.4 Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

Adult education has emerged as one of the most effective tools for empowering women and promoting gender equality. In many parts of India, women have historically faced barriers to education because of social customs, economic hardships, early marriage, and household responsibilities. Adult literacy programmes have helped bridge this educational gap by providing flexible learning opportunities suited to the needs of adult women (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

Educated women are more likely to participate in household decision-making, access healthcare services, understand legal rights, manage financial resources, and support the education of their children. Numerous studies have shown that female literacy contributes to lower infant mortality, improved maternal health, higher school enrolment rates, and greater participation in economic activities (Dreze & Sen, 2013). Thus, investments in adult education not only improve women's individual capabilities but also generate broader social and developmental benefits for families and communities.

1.3.5 Adult Education and Sustainable Development

The global development agenda increasingly recognizes education as a key driver of sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Adult education contributes directly to this goal by promoting literacy, skill development, environmental awareness, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning (United Nations, 2015).

In India, the National Education Policy 2020 reflects this global vision by redefining adult education as a comprehensive framework that

extends beyond literacy to include critical life skills, vocational education, digital literacy, financial literacy, and continuing education. This policy acknowledges that lifelong learning is essential for building a resilient society capable of responding to technological change, climate challenges, economic transformation, and social inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The increasing use of digital platforms for education has further expanded learning opportunities for adults, particularly through online courses, community learning centres, mobile applications, and open educational resources. Although challenges such as the digital divide and unequal internet access persist, technology has significantly enhanced the reach and flexibility of adult education programmes across the country.

1.3.6 Adult Education as a Foundation for Nation Building

Nation building is a continuous process that depends on the active participation of informed, skilled, and socially responsible citizens. Adult education contributes to this process by developing human capital, reducing inequality, strengthening democratic values, empowering marginalized communities, and promoting lifelong learning. Rather than viewing literacy as an end in itself, contemporary educational policies recognize adult education as a means of improving the overall quality of life and ensuring inclusive national development.

India's journey from post-independence literacy campaigns to the holistic framework envisioned under the National Education Policy 2020 demonstrates a significant transformation in educational thinking. Adult education is no longer limited to teaching reading and writing; it has become a multidimensional strategy for empowering individuals, strengthening communities, and supporting sustainable national progress. As India moves toward becoming a knowledge-based economy, continued investment in adult education will remain essential for achieving equitable growth, social cohesion, and inclusive development.

1.4 Constitutional Perspective on Adult Education in India

The Constitution of India provides the philosophical and legal foundation for the development of an equitable and inclusive education system. Although the Constitution did not initially recognize education as a Fundamental Right, its framers considered education essential for achieving democracy, social justice, equality, and national development. The constitutional vision reflects the belief that education should not remain confined to children alone but should contribute to the intellectual, social, and economic advancement of all citizens. Consequently, the principles embedded in the Constitution have significantly influenced the evolution of adult education policies and literacy programmes in India (Basu, 2020).

While the Constitution does not contain a separate provision exclusively devoted to adult education, several Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs), and Fundamental Duties collectively provide the constitutional basis for promoting literacy, lifelong learning, and educational opportunities for adults. These provisions have guided successive governments in designing policies that seek to reduce illiteracy, empower disadvantaged communities, and promote inclusive development.

1.4.1 Education as an Instrument of Social Justice

The Preamble to the Constitution of India commits the nation to securing justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for all citizens. These constitutional ideals cannot be fully realized unless individuals possess the knowledge and awareness necessary to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Adult education contributes directly to these objectives by enabling citizens to participate more effectively in democratic institutions, access public services, and improve their socio-economic conditions (Government of India, 1950).

For adults who were deprived of formal education due to poverty, caste discrimination, gender inequality, or geographical isolation, literacy programmes represent an opportunity to overcome historical disadvantages. Adult education therefore serves not only educational

objectives but also broader constitutional goals related to equality and social empowerment.

1.4.2 Directive Principles of State Policy and Adult Education

The Directive Principles of State Policy, contained in Part IV of the Constitution, provide important guidance for the formulation of educational policies. Although these principles are not legally enforceable, they establish the responsibility of the State to promote social welfare and educational development.

Article 41 directs the State to make effective provisions for securing the right to education within the limits of its economic capacity and development. Although the Article primarily reflects a general commitment towards education, its underlying philosophy extends to adult learners by emphasizing that educational opportunities should remain available throughout life, particularly for economically disadvantaged groups.

Similarly, Article 45, in its original form, required the State to provide free and compulsory education for children up to the age of fourteen years. While this provision focused on children's education, it indirectly highlighted the importance of reducing illiteracy among future generations. After the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002), Article 45 was revised to emphasize early childhood care and education. Nevertheless, the broader objective of universal education continued to influence adult literacy programmes, especially for parents and communities where educational deprivation persisted.

Another significant constitutional provision is Article 46, which directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other weaker sections of society. Adult education programmes have played an important role in fulfilling this constitutional mandate by extending literacy and skill development opportunities to historically marginalized communities. Many government literacy missions have specifically targeted women, rural populations, tribal communities, and socially disadvantaged groups in accordance with the principles embodied in Article 46 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

1.4.3 Fundamental Rights and Educational Development

Although adult education is not explicitly recognized as a Fundamental Right, the constitutional recognition of education has significantly strengthened India's educational framework. The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002, inserted Article 21A, making free and compulsory education a Fundamental Right for children between six and fourteen years of age. While Article 21A directly addresses school education, its implementation has generated wider educational awareness among families and communities. Literate parents are generally more likely to ensure school attendance, support children's learning, and participate in educational activities. Consequently, adult literacy programmes complement the constitutional objective of universal elementary education by creating supportive home environments for learning.

The Supreme Court of India has also interpreted the Right to Life under Article 21 as encompassing the right to live with dignity. Education has repeatedly been recognized by the judiciary as an essential component of human dignity because it enables individuals to participate meaningfully in social, economic, and political life. From this perspective, adult education contributes indirectly to the realization of constitutional rights by enhancing citizens' capabilities and expanding their opportunities.

1.4.4 Fundamental Duties and Civic Responsibility

The Constitution also recognizes the role of citizens in promoting education through Fundamental Duties enumerated under Article 51A. These duties encourage citizens to develop scientific temper, promote harmony, preserve the nation's cultural heritage, and strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity.

In particular, Article 51A(k) places a responsibility on parents and guardians to provide educational opportunities for children between the ages of six and fourteen years. Although this provision primarily relates to children's education, its effective implementation often depends upon the educational awareness of adults themselves.

Literate parents are generally better equipped to understand the importance of schooling, monitor academic progress, and encourage lifelong learning within families. Thus, adult education indirectly strengthens the fulfilment of constitutional duties by creating informed and responsible citizens.

1.4.5 Constitutional Vision and the Evolution of Adult Education Policies

The constitutional commitment to equality, social justice, and inclusive development has continuously shaped India's adult education policies. Programmes such as the National Adult Education Programme (1978), the National Literacy Mission (1988), Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009), and the New India Literacy Programme (2022) were designed not merely to increase literacy rates but also to promote constitutional values by empowering citizens with knowledge, awareness, and practical life skills (Government of India, 1988; Ministry of Education, 2022).

The National Education Policy 2020 further strengthens this constitutional vision by redefining adult education within the broader framework of lifelong learning. The policy identifies adult education as a key instrument for promoting digital literacy, vocational skills, financial inclusion, health awareness, and active citizenship. By emphasizing equitable access to learning opportunities regardless of age, gender, or socio-economic status, NEP 2020 reflects the constitutional aspiration of creating an inclusive and knowledge-based society (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Therefore, although the Constitution does not explicitly use the term "adult education," its guiding principles have provided a strong normative foundation for the development of literacy campaigns, continuing education programmes, and lifelong learning initiatives. The evolution of adult education policies in India demonstrates a sustained effort to translate constitutional ideals into practical programmes that enhance individual dignity, reduce educational inequalities, and contribute to national development.

1.5 Need for Adult Literacy in India

Adult literacy remains an important developmental priority in India despite

significant improvements in the country's overall literacy rate over the past seven decades. A considerable number of adults, particularly women, rural populations, migrant workers, and economically disadvantaged groups, still face barriers to education due to poverty, social inequality, limited educational opportunities, and technological challenges. In this context, adult literacy is not merely about acquiring the ability to read and write; it is a means of improving livelihoods, strengthening citizenship, and promoting social inclusion (UNESCO, 2016).

One of the primary reasons for strengthening adult literacy is its direct contribution to economic development. Literate adults are better equipped to access employment opportunities, adopt modern technologies, manage financial resources, and participate in skill development programmes. As India's economy becomes increasingly technology-driven, basic literacy and digital competence have become essential for securing sustainable livelihoods (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Adult literacy also plays a significant role in women's empowerment. Educated women are more likely to participate in household decision-making, support their children's education, access healthcare services, and contribute to income-generating activities. Studies have consistently shown that improvements in female literacy positively influence family welfare, child health, and community development (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital services has created a new challenge in the form of digital literacy. Access to online banking, e-governance services, digital payments, telemedicine, and online learning requires adults to possess basic reading, writing, and technological skills. Therefore, adult literacy programmes must extend beyond traditional literacy to include digital competencies that enable citizens to participate effectively in the digital economy (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022).

Furthermore, adult literacy contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and

lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Recognizing these emerging needs, the National Education Policy 2020 advocates a comprehensive approach to adult education by integrating foundational literacy, critical life skills, vocational education, and continuing learning opportunities. Therefore, strengthening adult literacy remains essential for building an informed, skilled, and inclusive society. It not only enhances individual capabilities but also supports India's broader goals of social justice, economic growth, and sustainable national development.

1.6 Research Gap

A review of the existing literature indicates that several scholars have examined adult education in India from different perspectives, including literacy campaigns, women's empowerment, lifelong learning, and skill development (Freire, 1970; Knowles, 1980; UNESCO, 2016). Similarly, government reports and policy documents have highlighted the achievements of programmes such as the National Literacy Mission and Saakshar Bharat. However, most studies focus on individual programmes or specific time periods rather than providing a comprehensive historical analysis of the evolution of adult education policies from Independence to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Furthermore, limited research has examined how the objectives, strategies, and implementation mechanisms of adult education have changed over time in response to India's socio-economic and technological transformations. The integration of lifelong learning, digital literacy, vocational education, and community participation under NEP 2020 has also received relatively less academic attention.

The present study seeks to address this gap by providing a chronological and policy-oriented analysis of adult education in India. It examines the major policy initiatives introduced since 1947, evaluates their contributions and limitations, and analyses how NEP 2020 represents a significant shift towards a more comprehensive and inclusive framework of adult learning. The study therefore contributes to the existing literature by presenting an integrated understanding of the historical

development and future direction of adult education policies in India.

1.7 Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine the historical development and policy transformation of adult education in India from Independence to the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the evolution of adult education policies and programmes in India since Independence.
2. To analyse the objectives, implementation strategies, and outcomes of major adult education initiatives, including the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP), National Literacy Mission (NLM), Saakshar Bharat Mission, and the New India Literacy Programme.
3. To evaluate the role of adult education in promoting literacy, social inclusion, women's empowerment, and lifelong learning.
4. To examine the constitutional and policy framework supporting adult education in India.
5. To analyse the significance of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in redefining adult education through lifelong learning, digital literacy, vocational education, and continuing education.
6. To identify the major challenges in the implementation of adult education policies and suggest measures for strengthening adult learning initiatives in India.

The above objectives provide the conceptual foundation for analysing the changing priorities of adult education policies and assessing their contribution to India's educational and socio-economic development.

2. Review of Literature

Adult education has been widely recognized as an important component of social and economic development. Over the years, researchers, policymakers, and international organizations have emphasized its role in improving literacy, promoting lifelong learning, reducing inequalities, and enhancing citizens' participation in development. The existing

literature reflects a gradual shift from viewing adult education merely as a literacy programme to recognizing it as a comprehensive process of lifelong learning.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to the field was made by Paulo Freire (1970), who argued that adult education should empower individuals to critically understand their social realities rather than simply teach reading and writing. According to Freire, education is a means of social transformation that enables learners to challenge inequality and participate actively in democratic society. His ideas have significantly influenced adult literacy programmes in many developing countries, including India.

Similarly, Malcolm Knowles (1980) introduced the concept of andragogy, emphasizing that adults learn differently from children. He explained that adult learners are self-directed, possess rich life experiences, and prefer learning that is practical and relevant to their daily lives. Knowles' theory shifted the focus of adult education from teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred approaches, which continue to influence adult learning policies worldwide.

International organizations have also contributed substantially to the understanding of adult education. UNESCO (2016) defined adult learning as a lifelong process encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal education. The organization emphasized that adult education should not be limited to literacy but should include vocational skills, digital literacy, civic participation, health awareness, and sustainable development. This broader perspective has shaped educational reforms in many countries, including India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

In the Indian context, several scholars have examined the evolution and impact of adult education programmes. Tilak (2015) observed that education plays a central role in promoting inclusive development and reducing socio-economic disparities. He argued that adult literacy programmes are essential for improving human capital and achieving equitable growth. Likewise, Dreze and Sen (2013) highlighted the close relationship between literacy, social justice, and human development, emphasizing

that education enhances individual capabilities and expands opportunities for marginalized communities.

Research has also focused on the implementation of literacy missions in India. Singh (2018) examined the achievements and limitations of the National Literacy Mission and concluded that although literacy rates have improved considerably, challenges such as gender disparities, regional inequalities, and inadequate infrastructure continue to affect programme effectiveness. More recent studies by Kumar (2021) emphasized the growing importance of digital literacy and lifelong learning in the context of technological advancement and changing labour market demands.

A review of the available literature indicates that previous studies have primarily focused on individual literacy programmes, learner outcomes, or specific dimensions such as women's empowerment and skill development. Comparatively fewer studies have provided a comprehensive historical analysis of the evolution of adult education policies from Independence to the National Education Policy 2020. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the major policy developments, their implementation, and their contribution to the changing landscape of adult education in India.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to examine the evolution of adult education policies in India from Independence to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Since the study focuses on analysing policy developments, historical changes, and educational reforms, it relies entirely on secondary data collected from authentic and credible sources.

The secondary data have been gathered from government policy documents, reports of the Ministry of Education, publications of UNESCO, Census reports, books, peer-reviewed research articles, reports of the National Literacy Mission, the National Education Policy 2020, and other relevant academic sources. These documents provide comprehensive information regarding the

objectives, implementation strategies, achievements, and challenges of various adult education programmes introduced in India over different periods (UNESCO, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020).

A historical and policy analysis approach has been employed to trace the chronological development of adult education initiatives from the post-Independence period to the contemporary policy framework. In addition, content analysis has been used to examine the major themes, policy objectives, and reforms reflected in official documents and scholarly literature. This approach facilitates a systematic comparison of different programmes and helps identify changes in the government's approach towards adult education over time.

The collected information has been analysed through a comparative framework to understand the transition from literacy-oriented programmes to lifelong learning initiatives emphasized under NEP 2020. The study also considers the constitutional provisions and international perspectives that have influenced the formulation of adult education policies in India. Although the study is based exclusively on secondary sources and does not involve primary data collection, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution, policy transformation, and future direction of adult education in India. The findings are expected to contribute to academic discussions on educational policy and lifelong learning while offering useful insights for researchers, policymakers, and educators.

4. Evolution of Adult Education Policies in India

Adult education in India has undergone significant transformation since Independence. Initially, government efforts were primarily directed towards eliminating widespread illiteracy and providing basic education to adults who had missed formal schooling. Over time, the scope of adult education expanded from functional literacy to lifelong learning, digital literacy, vocational education, and skill development. This evolution reflects the changing socio-economic needs of the country and the growing recognition of education as a continuous process rather than a one-time activity (Ministry of Education, 2020).

TABLE 1: MAJOR ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN INDIA

Policy/Programme	Year	Major Objective	Key Outcome
Social Education Programme	1952	Promote basic literacy and community development	Introduced organized adult education initiatives
National Policy on Education	1968	Expand educational opportunities	Recognized adult education as a national priority
National Adult Education Programme (NAEP)	1978	Improve functional literacy among adults (15–35 years)	Expanded literacy programmes across rural India
National Literacy Mission (NLM)	1988	Achieve functional literacy through mass campaigns	Significant improvement in adult literacy rates
National Policy on Education (Revised)	1986/1992	Strengthen continuing education	Greater emphasis on lifelong learning
Saakshar Bharat Mission	2009	Enhance adult literacy, especially among women	Increased female literacy and community participation
New India Literacy Programme (ULLAS)	2022	Promote lifelong learning, digital and financial literacy	Shift towards technology-enabled adult education

Source: Compiled by the author using Government of India Reports, Ministry of Education (2020; 2022).

The table demonstrates that India's adult education policies have gradually shifted from literacy-focused programmes to a broader framework of lifelong learning. Earlier initiatives concentrated on teaching basic reading and writing skills, whereas recent policies emphasize digital literacy, vocational training, financial awareness, and continuous skill development. This transition became particularly evident with the National Education Policy 2020, which recognizes adult education as an integral part of inclusive and sustainable national development (UNESCO, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020).

4.1 Adult Education Policies in the Post-Independence Period (1947–1968)

At the time of Independence in 1947, India faced one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. According to the Census of 1951, only about 18.33 percent of the population was literate, with women and rural communities experiencing particularly low levels of educational attainment. The newly independent nation recognized that widespread illiteracy posed a major obstacle to economic progress, democratic participation, and social development. Consequently, adult education

emerged as an important component of national reconstruction (Government of India, 1951).

During the initial years after Independence, the Government of India adopted a Social Education approach that combined literacy with community development, health awareness, agricultural improvement, and civic education. Rather than focusing solely on teaching adults to read and write, these programmes aimed to create informed citizens capable of participating actively in the country's democratic and developmental processes. Community centres, village libraries, and voluntary organizations played an important role in implementing these initiatives.

A significant milestone during this period was the launch of the Social Education Programme in 1952, which sought to improve adult literacy while encouraging social awareness and community participation. Although the programme achieved limited success because of inadequate financial resources, shortage of trained instructors, and weak monitoring mechanisms, it laid the foundation for future adult education policies in India (Ministry of Education, 1966).

The recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–1966) further strengthened the importance of adult education. The Commission emphasized that education should become a lifelong process and recommended expanding literacy programmes to improve productivity, reduce poverty, and promote national integration. These recommendations significantly influenced the National Policy on Education (1968), which formally recognized adult education as an important component of India's educational system (Government of India, 1968).

Overall, the period between 1947 and 1968 was primarily a foundation-building phase. Although literacy levels improved gradually, the programmes introduced during these years established the policy framework for subsequent initiatives such as the National Adult Education Programme (1978) and the National Literacy Mission (1988). More importantly, the government began to view adult education not merely as a welfare measure but as a strategic investment in human resource development and nation building.

4.2 National Adult Education Programme (NAEP), 1978

The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) was launched by the Government of India on 2 October 1978 with the objective of reducing adult illiteracy and promoting functional education among adults in the age group of 15–35 years. It marked the first nationwide and organized effort to address the educational needs of adults through a structured policy framework. Unlike earlier literacy initiatives, NAEP recognized that literacy should be linked with social awareness, economic productivity, and community development rather than being limited to reading and writing skills (Government of India, 1978).

The programme focused on three major objectives: functional literacy, awareness generation, and skill development. Functional literacy aimed to equip adults with basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills, while awareness programmes sought to educate learners about health, sanitation, family welfare, environmental protection, and civic responsibilities. Skill-oriented training was

introduced to improve employment opportunities and encourage self-reliance, particularly among rural populations and economically weaker sections.

The implementation of NAEP relied on the active participation of universities, voluntary organizations, local institutions, and state governments. Adult education centres were established across different parts of the country, and community participation was encouraged to increase enrolment and learner retention. The programme also highlighted the importance of involving teachers, social workers, and volunteers in literacy campaigns, thereby creating a collaborative model for adult learning.

Despite its ambitious objectives, NAEP faced several challenges. Limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained instructors, and irregular attendance of learners affected the programme's overall effectiveness. In many rural areas, poverty, seasonal migration, and lack of awareness further reduced participation. As a result, the programme did not achieve the expected level of functional literacy nationwide (Tilak, 2015).

Nevertheless, the National Adult Education Programme represented a significant milestone in the history of adult education in India. It shifted the policy focus from isolated literacy efforts to a comprehensive national programme that combined education with socio-economic development. The experiences and lessons learned from NAEP later influenced the design of the National Literacy Mission (1988), which adopted a more participatory and mission-oriented approach to adult literacy. Thus, NAEP laid the institutional and policy foundation for the expansion of adult education initiatives in the decades that followed.

4.3 National Literacy Mission (NLM), 1988

Recognizing the limitations of the National Adult Education Programme, the Government of India launched the National Literacy Mission (NLM) in 1988 to accelerate adult literacy through a mission-mode approach. The primary objective of the Mission was to provide functional literacy to adults in the 15–35 years age group, particularly those belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged

sections of society. Unlike earlier programmes, the NLM emphasized people's participation, decentralized planning, and community ownership, making literacy a mass movement rather than a government-driven initiative (Government of India, 1988).

The Mission adopted the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) model, which encouraged the active involvement of local communities, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), volunteers, and Panchayati Raj Institutions. This participatory approach significantly improved awareness about literacy and helped expand educational opportunities in both rural and urban areas. The programme also integrated literacy with social awareness, women's empowerment, health education, environmental conservation, and vocational training, thereby broadening the scope of adult education beyond basic reading and writing skills.

One of the major achievements of the National Literacy Mission was the remarkable improvement in India's literacy rate over successive decades. It particularly contributed to increasing female literacy and reducing educational disparities across several states. However, regional imbalances, learner dropout, inadequate follow-up programmes, and differences in implementation quality continued to affect the long-term sustainability of literacy outcomes (UNESCO, 2016).

Despite these challenges, the National Literacy Mission transformed India's approach to adult education by demonstrating that community participation and decentralized governance could significantly improve programme effectiveness. The Mission also laid the foundation for subsequent initiatives such as Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009) and later reforms incorporated into the National Education Policy 2020, which further expanded the concept of adult education into lifelong learning.

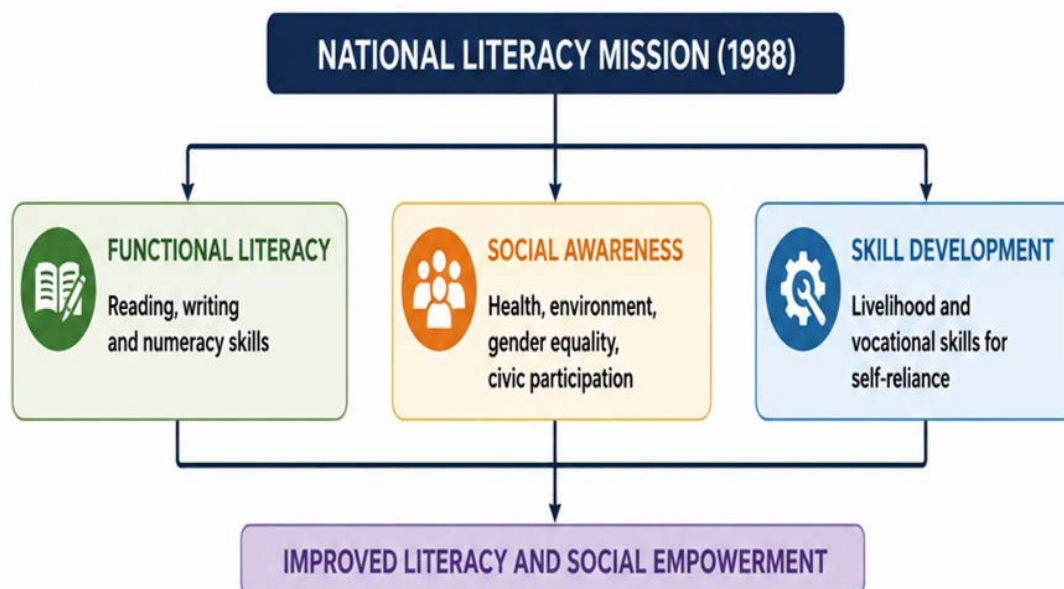


FIGURE 1: FRAMEWORK OF THE NATIONAL LITERACY MISSION (1988)

Source: Prepared by the author based on the National Literacy Mission (1988) guidelines and Ministry of Education reports.

The Mission adopted the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) model, which encouraged the active involvement of local communities, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), volunteers, and Panchayati Raj Institutions. This participatory approach significantly improved awareness

about literacy and helped expand educational opportunities in both rural and urban areas. The programme also integrated literacy with social awareness, women's empowerment, health education, environmental conservation, and vocational training, thereby broadening the

scope of adult education beyond basic reading and writing skills (UNESCO, 2016).

4.4 Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009)

Building upon the achievements of the National Literacy Mission, the Government of India launched the Saakshar Bharat Mission on 8 September 2009 with the objective of further reducing adult illiteracy, particularly among women and disadvantaged communities. The programme was introduced in response to the realization that, despite improvements in literacy rates, a significant proportion of India's adult population—especially rural women—remained outside the formal education system. Consequently, the Mission placed female literacy at the centre of its implementation strategy (Government of India, 2009).

The primary objective of Saakshar Bharat was to provide functional literacy, basic education, vocational skills, and continuing education to non-literate adults aged 15 years and above. The programme was implemented through Adult Education Centres, local self-government institutions, voluntary organizations, and trained volunteers. Community participation was encouraged to ensure greater outreach and sustainability of literacy activities.

A distinguishing feature of the Mission was its emphasis on women's empowerment. Nearly seventy percent of the programme's beneficiaries were expected to be women,

particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and economically weaker sections. Besides improving literacy, the programme promoted awareness regarding health, financial inclusion, legal rights, environmental protection, and social welfare schemes, thereby linking education with community development (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011).

The implementation of Saakshar Bharat contributed to improvements in adult literacy and increased participation of women in educational activities across several states. However, challenges such as irregular attendance, shortage of trained instructors, inadequate monitoring, and disparities in programme implementation limited its overall effectiveness. In addition, the rapid growth of digital technologies highlighted the need for a broader approach to adult education that included digital and financial literacy.

Despite these limitations, the Saakshar Bharat Mission represented an important transition in India's adult education policy. It expanded the focus from basic literacy to lifelong learning and social empowerment, paving the way for the comprehensive vision of adult education reflected in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the New India Literacy Programme (ULLAS).

TABLE 2: COMPARISON BETWEEN NATIONAL LITERACY MISSION AND SAAKSHAR BHARAT MISSION

Aspect	National Literacy Mission (1988)	Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009)
Primary Focus	Functional literacy	Functional literacy with women's empowerment
Target Group	Adults (15–35 years)	Adults (15 years and above)
Major Priority	Literacy campaigns	Female literacy and continuing education
Implementation	Total Literacy Campaigns	Adult Education Centres and community participation
Broader Outcome	Improved literacy rates	Literacy, skill development, and social empowerment

Source: Compiled by the author from Government of India (1988, 2009) and Ministry of Human Resource Development reports.

4.5 National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Adult Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant milestone in the evolution of adult education in India. Unlike earlier policies that primarily focused on improving literacy rates, NEP 2020 adopts a holistic and lifelong learning approach, recognizing that education should continue throughout an individual's life. The policy acknowledges that millions of adults still require educational opportunities to enhance their literacy, employability, digital competence, and overall quality of life (Ministry of Education, 2020).

A major contribution of NEP 2020 is the identification of five key components of adult education, namely Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Critical Life Skills, Vocational Skills Development, Basic Education, and Continuing Education. This broader framework reflects the changing educational needs of society, where adults require not only reading and writing skills but also digital literacy, financial literacy, health awareness, environmental consciousness, and professional competencies to participate effectively in a knowledge-based economy. The

policy further emphasizes the use of technology-enabled learning, online educational resources, community libraries, Adult Education Centres, and digital platforms to increase access to learning opportunities. It encourages collaboration among educational institutions, local communities, voluntary organizations, and government agencies to strengthen adult education programmes and promote lifelong learning across both rural and urban areas.

NEP 2020 also aligns India's adult education framework with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. By integrating literacy with skill development and lifelong learning, the policy seeks to empower individuals, improve employability, and foster social inclusion. Overall, NEP 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's adult education policy. It moves beyond the traditional objective of literacy eradication and establishes adult education as a continuous process of personal, social, and economic development. The policy provides a strong foundation for building an inclusive, digitally empowered, and knowledge-based society.

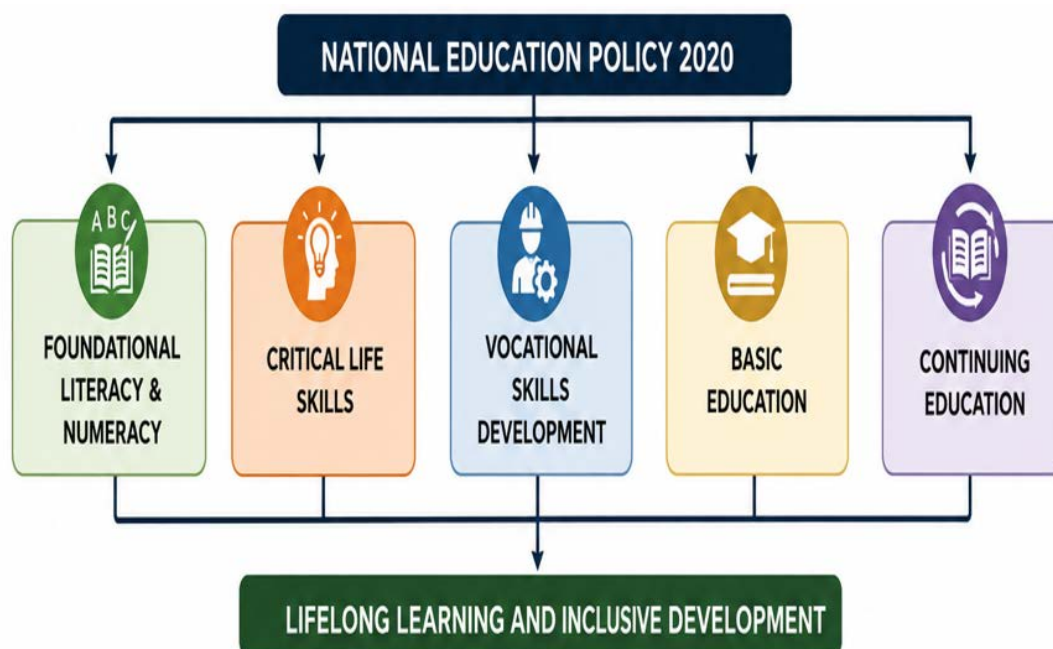


FIGURE 2: FIVE COMPONENTS OF ADULT EDUCATION UNDER NEP 2020

Source: Prepared by the author based on the National Education Policy (2020).

A major contribution of NEP 2020 is the identification of five key components of adult education, namely Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Critical Life Skills,

Vocational Skills Development, Basic Education, and Continuing Education. This broader framework reflects the changing educational needs of society, where adults

require not only reading and writing skills but also digital literacy, financial literacy, health awareness, environmental consciousness, and professional competencies to participate effectively in a knowledge-based economy (Ministry of Education, 2020).

4.6 Comparative Analysis of Adult Education Policies in India (1947–2020)

The evolution of adult education policies in India reflects a gradual transition from basic literacy programmes to a comprehensive lifelong learning framework. In the initial years after Independence, government initiatives primarily focused on reducing illiteracy and promoting community development through the Social Education Programme. These early efforts laid the foundation for organized adult education but were constrained by limited resources and institutional capacity (Government of India, 1968).

The launch of the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) in 1978 marked the beginning of a structured national approach by linking literacy with functional education, social awareness, and skill development. This approach was further strengthened through the National Literacy Mission (1988), which introduced a participatory model involving local communities, volunteers, and educational institutions. As a result, literacy campaigns became more decentralized and community-oriented, contributing significantly to improvements in adult literacy across the country (Government of India, 1988).

The Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009) shifted policy priorities towards women's literacy and continuing education, recognizing that female education plays a crucial role in family welfare and community development. The programme also emphasized vocational training and awareness generation, thereby broadening the objectives of adult education beyond literacy alone.

A major transformation occurred with the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which redefined adult education as an integral part of lifelong learning. The policy expanded the scope of adult education by incorporating digital literacy, financial literacy, vocational skills, critical life skills, and continuing education. This holistic approach aligns India's educational vision with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and reflects the changing demands of a knowledge-based and digitally connected society (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Overall, the comparative analysis indicates that India's adult education policies have evolved from addressing the problem of illiteracy to promoting inclusive, skill-oriented, and technology-enabled lifelong learning. This policy transformation demonstrates the government's growing commitment to creating an educated, empowered, and socially inclusive society.

TABLE 3: EVOLUTION OF ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES IN INDIA

Period	Major Policy/Programme	Primary Focus	Key Contribution
1947–1968	Social Education Programme	Basic literacy and community development	Foundation of adult education
1978	National Adult Education Programme (NAEP)	Functional literacy and awareness	Organized national adult education initiative
1988	National Literacy Mission (NLM)	Functional literacy through mass campaigns	Community participation and improved literacy
2009	Saakshar Bharat Mission	Women's literacy and continuing education	Greater focus on female literacy and empowerment
2020	National Education Policy (NEP) 2020	Lifelong learning and digital literacy	Holistic framework for adult education

Source: Compiled by the author from Government of India (1968, 1978, 1988, 2009) and Ministry of Education (2020).

5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of adult education policies in India reveals that the country's approach to adult learning has undergone a substantial transformation since Independence. Initially, government initiatives were primarily directed towards reducing illiteracy and providing basic reading and writing skills to adults who had remained outside the formal education system. Over time, however, the concept of adult education expanded to include lifelong learning, skill development, digital literacy, financial literacy, and social empowerment, reflecting the changing developmental needs of the country (Ministry of Education, 2020).

One of the major findings of the study is that adult education policies have progressively shifted from a welfare-oriented approach to a development-oriented framework. Early programmes such as the Social Education Programme and the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) focused mainly on functional literacy. Later initiatives, particularly the National Literacy Mission and Saakshar Bharat Mission, recognized that literacy should also contribute to community participation, women's empowerment, health awareness, and socio-economic development (Government of India, 1988).

The study further finds that community participation has been a key factor in the success of adult education programmes. The Total Literacy Campaign model under the National Literacy Mission demonstrated that collaboration among local communities, educational institutions, volunteers, and civil society organizations significantly improved programme implementation and learner participation. This participatory approach helped transform literacy campaigns into social movements rather than isolated government initiatives.

Another important finding is the growing emphasis on women's literacy. Programmes introduced after the 1990s increasingly recognized that educating women produces long-term social and economic benefits, including improved family health, higher school enrolment of children, greater financial independence, and increased participation in local governance. As a result, women's

empowerment became one of the central objectives of adult education policies in India (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

The study also highlights that NEP 2020 represents a major policy shift. Unlike previous literacy-focused programmes, the policy adopts a comprehensive approach by integrating foundational literacy, vocational education, digital literacy, financial literacy, critical life skills, and continuing education. This reflects the understanding that adults require continuous learning opportunities to adapt to technological advancements and changing labour market demands (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Despite these positive developments, the analysis identifies several persistent challenges. Regional disparities, shortage of trained instructors, inadequate funding, limited monitoring mechanisms, and unequal access to digital technologies continue to affect the effectiveness of adult education programmes. Rural areas, tribal communities, and economically weaker sections still face greater barriers in accessing quality adult learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2016).

Overall, the findings suggest that India has made remarkable progress in strengthening adult education policies over the past seven decades. The transition from literacy campaigns to lifelong learning demonstrates a significant evolution in educational policy. However, achieving the objectives of NEP 2020 will require sustained government commitment, technological innovation, institutional collaboration, and active community participation. Strengthening these areas will further enhance the role of adult education in promoting inclusive growth, social justice, and sustainable national development.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of adult education policies in India demonstrates a gradual transition from basic literacy initiatives to a comprehensive framework of lifelong learning. Since Independence, successive programmes such as the National Adult Education Programme, National Literacy Mission, Saakshar Bharat Mission, and the National Education Policy 2020 have expanded the scope of adult education by integrating literacy with skill

development, digital competence, vocational training, and social empowerment. These policy reforms have contributed significantly to improving literacy levels, promoting gender equality, and strengthening community participation. However, challenges such as regional disparities, inadequate infrastructure, limited digital access, and insufficient monitoring continue to affect programme effectiveness. The study concludes that adult education should remain a national priority for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Strengthening institutional support, enhancing digital learning opportunities, and encouraging community participation will be essential for realizing the vision of lifelong learning envisaged under the National Education Policy 2020 and achieving equitable educational opportunities for all citizens.

References

1. Basu, D. D. (2020). *Introduction to the Constitution of India* (26th ed.). LexisNexis.
2. Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
3. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
4. Government of India. (1950). *The Constitution of India*. Government of India Press.
5. Government of India. (1968). *National Policy on Education, 1968*. Ministry of Education.
6. Government of India. (1978). *National Adult Education Programme (NAEP)*. Ministry of Education.
7. Government of India. (1986). *National Policy on Education, 1986*. Ministry of Human Resource Development.
8. Government of India. (1988). *National Literacy Mission*. Ministry of Human Resource Development.
9. Government of India. (1992). *Programme of Action: National Policy on Education 1986* (Revised 1992). Ministry of Human Resource Development.
10. Government of India. (2009). *Saakshar Bharat Mission: Operational Guidelines*. Ministry of Human Resource Development.
11. Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (Revised and Updated). Cambridge Adult Education.
12. Kothari Education Commission. (1966). *Education and National Development: Report of the Education Commission (1964–66)*. Government of India.
13. Kumar, K. (2021). Adult education in India: Contemporary issues and policy perspectives. *Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 35(2), 145–162.
14. Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.
15. Ministry of Education. (2022). *New India.Literacy Programme (ULLAS): Guidelines 2022–2027*. Government of India.
16. Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2011). *Saakshar Bharat Programme: Guidelines and Framework*. Government of India.
17. Rogers, A. (2004). *Looking again at non-formal and informal education: Towards a new paradigm*. UNESCO Institute for Education.
18. Singh, R. (2018). Adult literacy programmes in India: Progress and challenges. *Indian Journal of Adult Education*, 79(3), 21–35.
19. Tilak, J. B. G. (2015). *Education and development in India: Critical issues in public policy and development*. Springer.
20. UNESCO. (2016). *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*. UNESCO.
21. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. (2022). *Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE V): Citizenship Education—Empowering Adults for Change*. UNESCO.
22. United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations.