

Research in Adult Education Departments in India after the Implementation of NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

With the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, adult education in India has shifted from being a marginal area of policy intervention to a core component of the national human development agenda (Government of India, 2020). This article presents a systematic review of the research production of Adult Education Departments (AEDs) in Indian universities between 2020 and 2024. Based on 287 studies collated from SHODHGANGA, ERIC, Google Scholar and other repositories, the paper identifies emerging research themes, methodological trajectories, institutional geographies and structural constraints in the post NEP 2020 research landscape. The research has considerably expanded on digital literacy (22.3%), skill development (18.7%), lifelong learning (14.9%), gender equity (12.4%) and rural/tribal adult education (10.8%). These include long-term studies, interdisciplinary work, and evidence informed policymaking. The article dissects these issues and concludes with a forward looking research agenda for AEDs.

KEYWORDS: Adult Education, NEP 2020, Lifelong Learning, India, Digital Literacy, Systematic Review, Gender Equity

INTRODUCTION

The NEP 2020 was the first policy to be formulated since 1986 in India (Government of India, 2020). Although the impact of the NEP 2020 on school and higher education has been researched (Kumar, 2022; UGC, 2022), scant attention has been paid to its implications for adult education. Chapter 21 of NEP 2020 marks the first time adult education has not only been part of a rehabilitation strategy, but has also been accepted as a fundamental right and as a life long developmental program (Nayar, 2021). According to UNESCO (2022), India accounts for 24% of global adult illiterates. This burden is disproportionately borne by women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and rural populations. NEP 2020 envisages a national mission to focus on foundational literacy and numeracy, vocationalisation of adult education, technology enabled learning and creation of a national lifelong learning ecosystem (Government of India, 2020).

Little is known about the scholarship output of Indian AEDs, although school and higher education have received attention in reviews of NEP 2020 (Kumar, 2022; UGC, 2022), and adult education scholarship has been described as fragmented, poorly indexed, and institutionally marginalized (Bhola, 2003; Wankhede, 2021). In this vein, the current paper maps adult education research in India during 2020-2024 along the dimensions of thematic, methodological, institutional, and policy priorities. The first research question asked in the paper is: What are the dominant thematic priorities of adult education research after the NEP 2020? What methods are used in AEDs? What prevents and/or impacts research capacity in AEDs?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Gandhian Nai Talim and the Article 45 of the Constitution of India laid the foundations of adult education (Bhola, 2003). Each of the policy articulations of adult literacy, namely, the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP, 1978), the National Literacy Mission (NLM, 1988) and the Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009-12), enthused research but were largely programmatic and a theoretical (Wankhede, 2021). Mishra and Panda (2021) argue that Indian AED research was systematically decoupled from the global lifelong learning discourse, resulting in research that was mostly descriptive and policy derivative. The UGC (2022) noted a formal research deficit in continuing education and adult learning caused by structural underfunding, inadequate supervision of doctoral projects, and the lack of peer reviewed publication outlets.

The NEP 2020 articulates the mandate of AEDs with substantive changes, expanding the definition of adult education beyond functional literacy to include vocational skills, digital literacy, health education and financial literacy (Government of India, 2020) and endorsing the andragogical and participatory pedagogies. For Kumar (2022), the policy commitment is still promissory rather than programmatic, with no budget commitment or accountability structures for AEDs specifically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross (1981)'s typology of adult learners is influential in much adult learning research and practice internationally, though it has been critiqued for underestimating structural inequality and postcoloniality (Bhola, 2003). The UNESCO GRALE 4 (2022) report describes a shift in the adult learning policy landscape towards lifelong learning, though notes the continuing research to policy gap leading to weak policy impact in low and middle income countries, including India (UNESCO, 2022). According to Selwyn (2011), digital literacy of adults must go beyond technical skills to support critical digital citizenship. Sharma and Gupta's (2023) study showed that technology mediated literacy programmes in India improved basic literacy, but that continued use was reliant on digital sakhis, community level facilitators of technology adoption. This corroborates other international studies of technology adoption and social capital, where the goal of women's literacy in Indian policy documents is instrumentalised through its externalities rather than provided as an intrinsic right, thereby reproducing patriarchal positions in the progressive architecture of NEP 2020 (Verma and Singh, 2024). No evidence was found of municipalities implementing the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities framework which is noted as a possible innovation in urban policy (TISS, 2023). State adult education programs were excluded.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved a systematic review and thematic meta synthesis in accordance with the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2009). The SHODHGANGA, ERIC, Google Scholar, IndMed and institutional repositories of eighteen universities with functioning AEDs were searched for relevant articles. The search terms used were adult education, continuing education, lifelong learning, India, and NEP 2020 with Boolean operators for the period of January 2020 to December 2024.

From the initial search, 1247 results were found. This was reduced by 312 duplicates. A total of 935 records were screened by title and abstract. From the remaining studies, 648 were rejected as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. We then reviewed only the full text of 287 studies to obtain the final studies which were published by any identified AED in any institution within India, on adult education in India, and between January 2020 and December 2024. The thematic analysis was subjected to inter rater reliability, whereby two double coders independently coded a subsample of the data (n=29, or 10% of the sample), and their results were compared. Cohen Kappa for inter rater reliability was 0.81, indicating good agreement (Landis and Koch, 1977). Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006).

RESEARCH THEMES POST NEP 2020

The thematic analysis revealed a substantially diversified nature of the research landscape of Indian AEDs in the post-NEP 2020 period (Table 1).

Research Theme	No. of Studies	% of Studies	Key Sub themes
Digital Literacy and ICT Integration	64	22.3%	e learning, mobile learning, digital divide
Skill Development and Vocational Training	54	18.7%	NSQF alignment, RPL, livelihood skills
Lifelong Learning	43	14.9%	Learning ecosystems, community

Research Theme	No. of Studies	% of Studies	Key Sub themes
Frameworks			colleges
Gender Equity in Adult Education	36	12.4%	Women empowerment, SHGs, FPAR
Rural and Tribal Adult Education	31	10.8%	Multilingual literacy, community radio
Health and Financial Literacy	25	8.6%	COVID 19 response, UPI literacy
Policy Analysis and Governance	18	6.3%	NEP critique, state implementation
Pedagogy and Curriculum Design	13	4.5%	Andragogy, participatory learning
Interdisciplinary and Miscellaneous	3	1.5%	Environmental and rights literacy
TOTAL	287	100%	

Table 1: Distribution of Research Themes in Adult Education Departments, India (2020 to 2024), N = 287

Digital literacy (22.3%) was the most common area explicitly cited (NEP 2020 and technology-mediated continued access to education during COVID 19). Last mile connectivity and gendered barriers to digital access were the structural barriers stressed by the research conducted by Indira Gandhi National Open University and Jamia Millia Islamia (Rajesh, 2023; Mishra and Panda, 2021). Human resource development research (18.7%) has studied RPL protocols and NSQF compatibility for informal economy workers. Kumar (2022) found institutional silos between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Skill Development, and lack of alignment with the unified vision of NEP 2020. Gender studies (12.4%) note how SHGs (self-help groups) among rural Indian women support developing critical consciousness for collective action (Verma and Singh, 2024). Tribal adult education research (10.8%) shows how NEP 2020's standard school and higher education curricula conflict with tribal Adivasi people's linguistic and cultural diversity (Singh, 2022).

METHODOLOGICAL TRENDS

Table 2 describes the methodology of the reviewed studies.

Methodological Approach	No. of Studies	Percentage (%)
Survey and Questionnaire based (Quantitative)	96	33.4%
Qualitative (Interviews, FGDs, Ethnography)	78	27.2%
Mixed Methods	54	18.8%
Action Research and Participatory Research	38	13.2%
Secondary and Documentary Analysis	21	7.3%
TOTAL	287	100%

Table 2: Methodological Classification of Adult Education Research Studies (2020 to 2024), N = 287

Finally, participatory methods were used in 13.2% of studies. This is consistent with the social justice goals of the NEP 2020 and the Freirean tradition of community education in India (Bhola, 2003). However, less positively, less than 3% of studies used experimental or quasi experimental designs, the gold standard for Acta Sci., 27(2), 2026

DOI: [10.22178/acta.27.2.2](https://doi.org/10.22178/acta.27.2.2)

causal claims about programme effectiveness. Without this evidence, AEDs cannot make authoritative resource claims to government or funders (UNESCO, 2022). The literature on computational approaches (e.g., GIS literacy mapping, learning analytics) is limited, particularly considering that digital constitutes the largest component of the field of literacy (Rajesh, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The overarching finding of this review is the disjuncture between research production and policy utilization. The analysis of the State Education Policies of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Odisha revealed that they do not make any explicit mention of AED affiliated research. This knowledge to policy gap has been attributed to an absence of knowledge brokerage mechanisms and a weak evidence informed policy making culture in state level education bureaucracies (Kumar, 2022; Mishra and Panda, 2021).

Institutional marginalization: Most AEDs have only a small faculty and limited ability to supervise doctoral students and no research infrastructure. The geographic distribution of output is skewed: 68% of the studies in this review come from northern and southern India. The eastern and northeastern states with higher adult non literates have been underrepresented (Wankhede, 2021). The lack of UGC requirement for all Central Universities to have AED units perpetuates structural discrimination (UGC, 2022). International efforts to build sustainable adult education research capacity have identified national infrastructure, doctoral training fellowships, and high impact publication outlets (UNESCO, 2022), which are all lacking in India.

Regarding the potential impact of research methodology, one additional issue is that the research community is highly androcentric: fewer than one third of primary investigators were women in the literature reviewed, despite the fact that learners in the field are predominantly female. The limited representation of women may restrict the range of questions, theory, and research conducted (Verma and Singh, 2024).

CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 offered adult education its most important institutional opportunity since independence. The period following the NEP 2020 has seen a noted increase in thematic and methodological diversity. However, the institutional marginalization, underfunding, methodological conservatism, geographic concentration and weak policy nexus of the research ecosystem of Indian AEDs means that the vision of a Learning India will require the construction of a strong, equitable and methodologically advanced research ecosystem to generate the evidence and critical reflection that transformative educational practice demands (UNESCO, 2022; Government of India, 2020). Adult Education Departments have a special intellectual and democratic responsibility to do research that is rigorous and socially just but on the ground and policy relevant.

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