A Policy Perspective on Media Literacy in Adult Education: Insights from NEP 2020

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Abstract

Media literacy has become an essential skill in today's digital age, particularly for adult learners in rural areas and marginalized communities. Critically analyzing and evaluating media content is crucial for fostering informed, responsible citizenship and ensuring social and economic empowerment. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions a transformative approach to adult education and lifelong learning, it lacks a clear focus on media literacy, which is vital in the digital era. Earlier policies, such as the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968, NPE 1986, and the Programme of Action (PoE) 1992, laid the foundation for adult education but did not specifically address media literacy. This paper critically examines policy provisions for adult education and media literacy, identifying key gaps in their integration within lifelong learning frameworks. It also explores the challenges of implementing media literacy programmes, including digital disparities between urban and rural areas, the absence of a structured media literacy curriculum for adult learners, and the lack of gender-sensitive approaches. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of international organizations like UNESCO and the United Nations, whose frameworks have influenced global practices in media literacy and lifelong learning. The findings underscore the urgent need for a national media literacy framework tailored to adult education, incorporating localized content in regional languages and ensuring gender inclusivity. The paper recommends embedding media literacy into existing adult education programmes and leveraging grassroots innovations, such as NGO-led initiatives like Nirantar's community media projects and the Digital India Foundation's digital literacy programmes. By addressing these gaps, India can

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empower adult learners, especially women and marginalized groups to engage with media critically, participate actively in democratic processes, and navigate the complexities of the digital world.

Keywords: *UNESCO, media literacy, lifelong learning, adult education, digital skill, NEP 2020.*

1. Introduction

With the advent of new media technologies, the role of media in shaping society has undergone a transformative shift. This shift has led scholars to re-conceptualize literacy from a traditional notion of reading and writing to new media literacy, encompassing the competencies to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content (Potter, 2016; Hobbs, 2010). In today's digital age, media literacy is an essential skill for individuals to navigate the complex and evolving information landscape (Livingstone, 2004). For adults, critically assessing media content, detecting misinformation, and engaging with digital platforms meaningfully is crucial for personal, social, and economic development, especially for people from rural and marginalized backgrounds (UNESCO, 2017).

Recognizing the significance of lifelong learning and adult education, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 claims to envisions a holistic and inclusive education approach incorporating digital and media literacy (Government of India, 2020). However, integrating media literacy within adult education programmes remains an underexplored area in India. India's policies on adult education have evolved significantly, shaped by international frameworks such as UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), which emphasize the role of education in fostering active citizenship and critical thinking (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2022).

Historically, India's approach to adult education has progressed through various policy stages. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968 was the first significant document to acknowledge the importance of universal literacy. Later, NPE 1986 emphasized bridging disparities between social groups through inclusive education, focusing on women's empowerment and functional literacy (Government of India, 1986). The Programme of Action (PoA) 1992 further reinforced these goals by advocating for community-driven literacy programmes. These earlier policies provided the foundation for NEP 2020, which seeks to modernize adult education by incorporating digital and media literacy into lifelong learning frameworks.

This paper critically examines the policy provisions on media literacy in NEP 2020, particularly concerning adult education, and evaluates their effectiveness in addressing media literacy as a component of lifelong learning. Additionally, it identifies key challenges in implementing media literacy programmes for adult learners, particularly in rural and urban communities, and proposes policy recommendations to bridge these gaps. The research uses secondary sources, including government reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature, to analyze policy gaps and opportunities.

This study is based on the following objectives:

- To critically analyze the provisions of NEP 2020 related to adult education and assess how effectively they address the media literacy framework as a component of lifelong learning;
- To identify gaps and challenges in implementing media literacy programmes for adult learners, particularly in rural and urban communities in India;
- To propose policy recommendations to address the identified gaps and enhance media literacy integration within adult education programmes.

2. Conceptual Framework of Media Literacy

Media Literacy: Definition and Framework

Scholars and international organizations have widely discussed media literacy as an essential skill for engaging with contemporary information environments. It is broadly defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms (UNESCO, 2010: 73). This extends beyond digital literacy, including critical thinking, ethical media engagement, and active participation in democratic processes (Hobbs, 2010: 42). Scholars such as Renee Hobbs emphasize media literacy's role in fostering critical engagement and civic participation, which are crucial in democratic societies, including India (Hobbs, 2010:17; Kellner & Share, 2019: 12).

Despite its growing importance, India lacks a unified national framework for media literacy, unlike countries such as Finland and Canada, where it is systematically incorporated into educational curricula (Kellner & Share, 2019). Instead, India's approach prioritizes digital access over critical media engagement skills, potentially making its population more susceptible to misinformation and digital manipulation (Das & Schroeder, 2020: 1774).

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Media literacy in the context of adult education extends beyond basic literacy, e.g., 3Rs, i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic. On the other hand, digital literacy includes competencies such as recognizing bias, identifying misinformation, thinking critically about media messages, and utilizing information ethically. These skills empower individuals to engage in public discourse, participate in democratic processes, and assert their rights as informed citizens (Stratu-Strelet, 2020).

Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: A Conceptual Shift

The discourse on adult education and lifelong learning has evolved significantly under the influence of UNESCO and its affiliated organizations. Traditionally, literacy was viewed as basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills (e.g. 3Rs). However, UNESCO's perspective has expanded this definition to include functional, critical, and multiple literacies, recognizing that literacy is not a fixed skill but a dynamic set of competencies essential for personal needs and societal development (UNESCO, 2015: 26; UIL, 2022).

As defined by UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), adult education enables individuals to develop knowledge, skills, and competencies throughout life to participate in economic, social, and political spheres (UIL, 2015: 7). This shift towards lifelong learning aligns with India's NEP 2020, which seeks to integrate adult education with digital literacy and critical media engagement (GOI, 2020).

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Media Literacy

The global adult education movement has been profoundly shaped by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which argues that education should be an instrument for liberation and empowerment rather than passive knowledge transfer (Freire, 1970: 74). According to Freire, education should enable learners to examine social realities critically, challenge dominant narratives, and engage in transformative action - principles directly applicable to media literacy (Freire, 1970: 76; Giroux, 2011).

Freire's concept of "critical consciousness" (conscientization) is particularly relevant to media literacy, as it emphasizes questioning power structures, deconstructing media messages, and resisting propaganda. This framework positions media literacy as a vital tool for democratic participation and social change, particularly in societies where media influence is pervasive (Freire, 1973; Kellner, 2020).

Media Literacy as Part of the Broader Conceptual Framework

Incorporating media literacy into adult education aligns with this broader conceptual shift from basic to critical and digital literacies. As a multidimensional skill, media literacy is essential for lifelong learning, as it empowers individuals to engage in informed decision-making and participate actively in democratic processes; recognize and resist disinformation, fake news, and biased narratives; utilize digital and media tools for self-expression and community engagement; and improve socio-economic opportunities through access to credible information and skill development (Stratu-Strelet, 2023; UIL, 2022). Thus, media literacy should not be seen in isolation but as an integral part of lifelong learning and adult education policies, particularly in the context of India's evolving educational landscape under NEP 2020.

3. Media Literacy and Adult Education in NEP 2020: Policy Provisions

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes adult education as a crucial component of lifelong learning, categorizing it into five key areas: foundational literacy and numeracy, critical life skills, vocational skills development, basic literacy, and continuing education (GOI, 2020). While media literacy is not explicitly mentioned, its core elements, such as critical thinking, digital literacy, and information verification, are embedded within these broader objectives. Given the increasing challenges of misinformation and digital manipulation, integrating media literacy within adult education is essential to developing individuals' ability to analyze media content, identify biases, and distinguish between reliable and misleading information. (Mihailidis, 2019). Although NEP 2020 does not directly outline media literacy initiatives, its emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving aligns with the principles of media literacy, highlighting the policy's potential to promote informed digital engagement.

A significant provision of the NEP 2020 emphasizes technology-driven learning to enhance adult education in India. By integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into educational frameworks, the policy aims to improve digital literacy, critical thinking, and media literacy among adult learners.

A pivotal initiative in this regard is the establishment of the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), an autonomous body designed to facilitate the free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enrich learning, assessment, planning, and administration across educational sectors (GOI, 2020: 56).

To ensure accessible and equitable adult education programmes, NEP 2020 advocates leveraging existing digital platforms such as SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) and DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing). These platforms offer a wide array of e-learning materials, enabling learners to access high-quality educational resources irrespective of their geographical location.

The policy emphasizes that technology integration should be meticulously planned to ensure that digital learning platforms are utilized effectively for enhancing the learning experience (GOI, 2020: 56).

Furthermore, NEP 2020 underscores the importance of integrating media literacy modules within these digital platforms to enhance adult learners' ability to critically engage with online information, assess sources, and develop digital resilience. Research highlights that digital literacy is a foundation for media literacy, aiding individuals in effectively accessing, evaluating, and navigating media content.

NEP 2020 aims to bridge critical gaps in adult learners' capabilities to navigate misinformation, digital fraud, and biased media narratives by embedding media literacy training into existing digital learning infrastructures. This initiative aligns with the policy's broader goal of fostering an informed and media-savvy adult population, contributing to lifelong learning in the digital age.

In addition to digital initiatives, The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes the crucial role of community participation and local institutions in strengthening adult education. The policy emphasizes the importance of leveraging public and community spaces such as libraries, schools, and other local centers to provide accessible lifelong learning opportunities. These community-driven initiatives are particularly designed to improve accessibility for rural and marginalized populations by providing literacy and skill development programmes that are specific to the needs of the local community.

NEP 2020 recommends fostering community participation in adult education through robust and innovative government initiatives, aiming to achieve 100% literacy at an accelerated pace (GOI, 2020: 52).

Public and community libraries, along with other local learning hubs, provide an opportunity to promote media literacy through community-driven initiatives, enabling learners to engage in discussions, workshops, and practical exercises that develop

their critical media analysis skills. Research indicates that community-based interventions are particularly effective in fostering media literacy, especially among individuals with limited access to formal digital education. These local learning spaces can empower adult learners to analyze media narratives, verify information, and critically understand media influence in public discourse by utilizing interactive and participatory learning models. This approach aligns with NEP 2020's vision of integrating lifelong learning with digital and media literacy, ensuring that even the most underserved populations develop the necessary skills to navigate today's complex media landscape.

However, Indian education policies have evolved to address gender disparities in adult education, but significant gaps remain. NEP 1968 had a limited focus on women's specific learning needs, treating literacy as a general goal without addressing socio-cultural barriers. NEP 1986 marked a shift by linking women's education to empowerment, leading to the Mahila Samakhya programme (1988), which emphasized collective learning, participatory curricula, and social transformation. This model proved that women's literacy is most effective when tied to empowerment and community action.

NEP 2020 recognizes gender disparities in education and promotes flexible learning, digital inclusion, and vocational training ((GOI, 2020: 26). However, it lacks a structured framework for collective empowerment akin to Mahila Samakhya. While policy reforms acknowledge the need for inclusive education, they often overlook the fact that women's learning is deeply rooted in social interactions and shared experiences rather than isolated literacy initiatives.

Research in adult education indicates that interactive and participatory learning environments encourage women's engagement more effectively than traditional literacy programmes. Drawing from global best practices, Indian policy must prioritize gender-responsive adult education by integrating participatory models and grassroots collaborations, ensuring education is a literacy and social change tool.

Although NEP 2020 lays the groundwork for integrating media literacy in adult education, further policy refinements are needed for its explicit inclusion in lifelong learning. Leveraging digital platforms, strengthening community-based initiatives and gender issues, and embedding critical thinking in adult education can enhance media literacy for informed citizenship and digital participation.

A structured policy implementation and curriculum development approach will equip adult learners with essential skills to navigate today's complex media landscape.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Gaps and Challenges in Integrating Media Literacy into Adult Education under NEP 2020

The evaluation of policy documents reveals gaps at both the rulebook and implementation levels. While NEP 2020 provides a broad framework for adult education, recommending strong government initiatives for 100% literacy by 2047, its approach to media literacy remains vague and insufficient. This section highlights the need for a more structured and inclusive framework for media literacy in adult education by examining key policy gaps and ambiguities.

One of the most critical challenges is the digital divide, which significantly impacts media literacy and adult education, particularly in underprivileged and rural areas. Only 38% of Indian households are digitally literate, with substantially lower percentages in rural regions, and only 31% of the population in rural areas has an internet connection, compared to 67% in urban areas (Oxfam India, 2022, p. 21). On a global scale, UESCO (2020) reports that 773 million adults lack basic literacy skills, with two-thirds being women. Furthermore, the Education for All GMR (2014) indicates that 37% of the world's illiterate population resides in India. These issues were made worse by the COVID-19 epidemic, which interrupted adult education and increased digital exclusion, especially for women. This highlighted the urgent need to bridge the digital divide and assist underserved communities.

A significant policy gap is the lack of a structured media literacy curriculum in adult education. While NEP 2020 acknowledges digital literacy, it does not explicitly define media literacy as a core component of lifelong learning. Despite years of media education in India, it remains an evolving discipline. The absence of a well-defined curriculum leaves adult learners without essential skills to critically analyze media, engage with digital content responsibly, and identify misinformation. Without a structured approach, media literacy remains a theoretical concept rather than a practical skill in adult education frameworks.

A significant gap in NEP 2020's provisions is the lack of an explicit focus on gender disparities in adult education. Historically, women's learning styles and engagement differ from men's. Research and practice in adult education shows that

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literacy programmes alone do not always attract women; collective interactions, shared experiences, and community-driven learning foster participation. NPE 1986's Mahila Samakhya programme proved that women's adult education must emphasize empowerment at both personal and collective levels. Theoretical and practical insights into adult education suggest that women are more likely to engage in learning through peer discussions, storytelling, and shared experiences rather than rigid literacy-based curricula. This participatory model, where women help shape the curriculum, sustains learning and drives social change. NEP 2020 lacks this approach, raising concerns about its gender-inclusivity. Effective adult education must foster interactive, experience-driven learning rather than solely focusing on literacy.

Furthermore, the UNESCO's UIL highlights individual and collective empowerment in women's adult education. Globally, 122 million girls and 128 million boys are out of school, and women still account for almost two-thirds of all adults who are unable to read.[2] Nirantar and Digital India Foundation work to bridge the gender gap in digital literacy. However, NEP 2020 lacks participatory models, overlooking women's unique challenges in digital engagement. The policy must integrate empowerment driven and collective learning approaches for inclusive media literacy.

Additionally, the lack of media literacy training for educators is a critical shortcoming. The policy doesn't include any particular recommendations or training programmes for teachers in adult education. Effective media literacy education requires trained educators who can guide learners in digital engagement, critical thinking, and responsible media consumption. Integrating media literacy into adult education will remain challenging without adequate teacher training, limiting its real-world impact.

The policy also fails to address media bias and misinformation, two significant issues in today's digital environment. Adult learners are susceptible to manipulation since NEP 2020 does not include specific strategies to help adult learners critically assess media content or combat digital misinformation. This omission is a critical policy gap, given the increasing influence of disinformation on public discourse. Although studies show that media literacy can help combat false information (Livingstone, 2018; Hobbs, 2021), the policy ignores this growing concern.

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[2]UNESCO https://www.unesco.org › gender-equality › education Retrieved from Google on 19 Feb. 2025.

In addition to these structural and content gaps, several other implementation challenges hinder the integration of media literacy into adult education under NEP 2020. Language difficulties restrict non-native English speakers from accessing media literacy content, while lack of infrastructure in rural places limits digital access. Socio-cultural resistance further complicates adoption, as some groups believe media literacy is unnecessary. Additionally, a lack of awareness among educators and learners' limits programme adoption.

5. Recommendations

A significant government priority should be to develop a National Media Literacy Framework through adult education programmes. This framework must offer clear objectives, benchmarks, and guidelines for fostering media literacy across diverse demographic groups. It should align with broader national education plans, such as NEP 2020, ensuring individuals have essential skills to navigate the evolving media landscape. In addition to defining clear guidelines, the framework should cover various aspects of media literacy, including understanding media content, assessing sources, sharing information responsibly, and consuming media ethically. Collaboration between civil society organizations, media outlets, and academic institutions is crucial for ensuring inclusivity.

Media literacy should be integrated into existing adult learning programmes to maximize outreach. Foundational literacy initiatives, continuing education programmes, and community learning centers provide ideal platforms for embedding media literacy content. Adult learners engaged in skill development and digital literacy programmes can simultaneously be trained to spot misinformation, evaluate media credibility, and make informed decisions. In addition to enhancing critical thinking, embedding media literacy will empower learners to participate actively in civic and political processes.

Case Studies of NGO driven literacy programmes demonstrate the impact of grassroots initiatives. Nirantar's - Pitara[3], a local newspaper initiative led by village women, enhances literacy while fostering critical engagement with news. Similarly, the Digital India Foundation focuses on digital literacy, misinformation awareness, and online safety, particularly in rural areas. In addition to strengthening community driven models, integrating such grassroots-driven media literacy initiatives into NEP 2020 can bridge urban-rural disparities and make media education more accessible.

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[3]https://give.do/discover/19UP/nirantar/

Access to the internet remains a significant barrier to media literacy, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. The government must expand digital infrastructure by ensuring reliable internet connectivity, affordable digital devices, and electricity in underserved areas.

In addition to strengthening the Digital India programme, initiatives such as community internet hubs, device subsidies, and partnerships with private tech companies can help narrow the digital divide. Expanding digital access will enable citizens to engage effectively with media literacy programmes.

Teachers and community facilitators play a critical role in promoting media literacy. A structured teacher training programme should be developed to equip educators with media literacy concepts, digital tools, and effective teaching strategies. In addition to training educators in rural and disadvantaged areas, key elements of this initiative should include workshops, continuous professional development, mentorship programmes, and educator networks to exchange best practices and resources.

For media literacy programmes to be effective, they must be contextualized to regional languages, cultures, and media practices. Developing localized educational materials will make programmes more relatable, ensuring diverse communities engage meaningfully. In addition to creating language-sensitive curricula, collaborations with local cultural, political, and social organizations will help tailor media literacy initiatives to community needs. A powerful example is Khabar Lahariya, a community newspaper launched in 2002 by the NGO Nirantar that empowers marginalized voices by publishing in local dialects. Its success is recognized through awards like the Laadli Media Award and the Chameli Devi Women in Journalism Award, highlighting the importance of localized, community-driven media initiatives in strengthening media literacy and public engagement.

NEP 2020 must adopt a gender-responsive approach to make adult education truly inclusive. Women's learning needs differ from men's, and basic literacy alone does not always attract them. Interactive, experience-sharing, and community-driven learning approaches are crucial.

The Mahila Samkhya programme exemplified the effectiveness of participatory education models prioritizing empowerment at both personal and collective levels. In addition to prioritizing participatory education models, structured frameworks for women's adult education should include grassroots collaborations, peer-learning networks, and flexible learning mechanisms to address socio-cultural barriers. Digital

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literacy programmes tailored to women's needs must also be prioritized to bridge the gendered digital divide.

Media literacy programmes must empower individuals to recognize misinformation, media bias, and unethical journalism. Training should focus on factchecking, propaganda detection, understanding algorithms, and evaluating sources. In addition to fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and ethical media consumption, partnerships with fact-checking organizations and media professionals should be encouraged.

These collaborations will help individuals navigate the information landscape responsibly and foster an engaged, informed citizenry. These recommendations provide essential pillars for a strong media literacy ecosystem in India. By integrating grassroots models, expanding digital access, and embedding critical thinking skills into adult education, India can create a resilient and informed society equipped to tackle the challenges of the digital age.

6. Conclusion

Media literacy is a crucial component of lifelong learning in today's information-rich and digitally complex environment. While NEP 2020 lays out a roadmap for adult education, it lacks a dedicated focus on media literacy, particularly in the context of the digital age. An independent media literacy framework is essential to equip adults with the critical skills for navigating the evolving and often distorted media landscape.

The contributions of various NGOs, such as *Nirantar* and the *Digital India Foundation*, highlight innovative approaches that bridge conventional literacy with digital and media literacy. *Nirantar's* work integrating digital literacy into adult learning programmes, particularly for women, and its initiative of training women to produce the local newspaper *Pitara* demonstrates how grassroots efforts can create sustainable literate environments. Similarly, the *Digital India Foundation's* initiatives in digital literacy reflect an effort to enhance digital access and cyber awareness. Incorporating such models into national policies could provide valuable insights for integrating media literacy into adult education and lifelong learning programmes under NEP 2020.

Furthermore, India's policy trajectory in media and digital literacy has been shaped not only by domestic initiatives but also by international frameworks. Organizations like UNESCO and the UIL have played a significant role in defining

global best practices, many of which have influenced India's education policies. Earlier policies, such as the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968 and 1986, laid the groundwork for lifelong learning strategies, but they must now be expanded to include media literacy as a core component. Additionally, it is crucial to integrate gender-sensitive approaches in policy recommendations to ensure equitable access and meaningful participation, particularly for women and marginalized communities.

As India moves toward a more digitally connected future, embedding media literacy within adult education policies will not only empower individuals to engage critically with media but also strengthen democratic participation and social inclusion. A comprehensive and inclusive media literacy framework, informed by global perspectives and grassroots innovations, is necessary to create a resilient and informed citizenry.

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