

NEP 2020 and Its Sociological Implications: An Empirical Analysis of Equity, Identity, and Structural Transformation in Indian Education

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents one of the most sweeping educational reforms in independent India, replacing the 34-year-old National Policy on Education of 1986. While significant scholarly attention has focused on its pedagogical and administrative dimensions, the sociological ramifications of this policy remain underexplored in academic discourse. This study presents a mixed-methods empirical investigation examining the sociological implications of NEP 2020 across five major domains: social stratification and equity, linguistic identity and multilingual education, caste and gender dynamics, digital divide and technological access, and community-school relationships. Drawing upon structured survey data collected from 480 participants across urban, semi-urban, and rural strata in five Indian states (Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Assam), and supplemented by 42 in-depth qualitative interviews with educators, students, parents, and policymakers, the study reveals significant sociodemographic disparities in NEP 2020 awareness, readiness, and projected benefit. Findings indicate that urban and upper-caste respondents report substantially higher awareness of the policy's provisions (78%), compared to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe respondents (39%) and rural populations (42%). Using Bourdieu's framework of social capital and field theory alongside Durkheim's structural functionalism, the study critically interrogates how the policy simultaneously holds emancipatory potential and risks reinforcing existing hierarchies if implementation gaps are not addressed. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for equitable and sociologically sensitive implementation of NEP 2020.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, sociological analysis, educational equity, social stratification, multilingual education, digital divide, Bourdieu, mixed-methods, India*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) constitutes a landmark restructuring of the country's educational architecture. Approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, the policy envisions a radical shift from rote memorization to competency-based learning, from rigid disciplinary silos to multidisciplinary curricula, and from a centralized examination culture to holistic assessment frameworks. Encompassing schooling from early childhood care through higher education, NEP 2020 has been heralded as a transformative document with the potential to reorient India's educational trajectory toward the demands of the 21st century (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Yet, educational policy does not exist in a sociological vacuum. Schools are not merely sites of knowledge transmission; they are, as Bourdieu (1977) argued, fields in which social capital is reproduced, distributed, and sometimes contested. Any major reform of educational architecture is, therefore, also a sociological intervention. This insight gives urgent relevance to a systematic sociological examination of NEP 2020.

Despite the policy's stated commitment to equity, inclusivity, and multiculturalism, critics have raised concerns about its potential to deepen pre-existing social cleavages. Ramachandran and Saihjee (2002) noted that Indian educational reforms have historically privileged urban, upper-caste, and economically advantaged populations. Singh et al. (2024) recently observed that NEP 2020's digital learning emphasis may systematically disadvantage students in areas with poor internet infrastructure. Kumari and Bhatt (2025) highlight that the medium-of-instruction provisions, though culturally sensitive in principle, risk creating fragmented educational outcomes if implementation is not strategically supported by resource allocation.

This paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How is awareness of NEP 2020 distributed across sociodemographic strata in India? (2) What sociological barriers impede effective implementation of NEP 2020? (3) How do caste, gender, linguistic identity, and socioeconomic status interact with NEP 2020's provisions? (4) What does a Bourdieusian

and functionalist theoretical lens reveal about the policy's transformative potential and structural limitations?

The study contributes to the nascent but rapidly growing body of sociological scholarship on NEP 2020 by integrating empirical data with rigorous theoretical analysis, offering insights that are timely, evidence-grounded, and policy-relevant.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly discourse on NEP 2020 has expanded rapidly since its notification. Rao and Chandrashekhar (2024) analyzed NEP 2020 through the lens of educational federalism, arguing that the policy creates productive tension between central vision and state-level implementation autonomy. Their analysis underscores that differential state-level capacities will produce uneven sociological outcomes, particularly in the domains of teacher education and vocational integration.

Patel and Gupta (2025) conducted a comparative study of NEP 2020's provisions on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) with similar policy frameworks in Brazil and South Africa, concluding that India's approach is more structurally ambitious but faces steeper equity challenges due to the scale of socioeconomic heterogeneity. Their mixed-methods study of 320 teachers across Gujarat and Odisha found that only 47% felt adequately prepared to implement the FLN mandate.

On the question of language and identity, Mohanty (2024) offers a nuanced sociological reading of NEP 2020's three-language formula. While applauding the policy's recognition of mother-tongue instruction in the formative years, Mohanty warns that without commensurate investment in regional-language textbook development and teacher training, the provision will remain tokenistic. Srivastava and Dey (2025) extend this critique, empirically demonstrating that first-generation learners from tribal communities (Adivasis) in Jharkhand experience higher dropout rates when instructional language abruptly shifts at Grade 5.

Kumari and Bhatt (2025) examine the gender dimension of NEP 2020, acknowledging the policy's explicit commitment to gender equity through its Gender Inclusion Fund. Their study of 200 rural women in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan found that while awareness of this provision was low (only 31%), those who were informed expressed optimism about its potential to address patriarchal barriers to girls' education.

Digital equity in the context of NEP 2020 has received growing attention. Singh et al. (2024) report that the digital infrastructure required to realize NEP 2020's technology integration ambitions is present in only 38% of government schools in tribal and rural areas. This finding resonates with Nambissan's (2023) broader argument that technologically mediated educational reforms risk encoding new forms of social exclusion if material inequalities are left unaddressed.

Theoretical engagement with NEP 2020 has employed multiple sociological frameworks. Chakraborty and Roy (2024) apply Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus to explain why NEP 2020's holistic development mandate is differentially received by families of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Families rich in cultural capital view the policy's flexibility as an opportunity; those with limited social capital experience the same flexibility as destabilizing uncertainty. Mehrotra (2025) draws on critical race and caste theory to interrogate the policy's silence on caste-based discrimination in educational spaces, arguing that structural transformation requires explicit anti-caste provisions beyond mere reservation statistics.

This paper builds on and synthesizes these contributions, adding original empirical data and applying a multi-framework theoretical lens to produce a comprehensive sociological assessment of NEP 2020 as it enters its fifth year of phased implementation.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Capital

This study employs Pierre Bourdieu's field theory as its primary sociological lens. Bourdieu conceptualizes social life as constituted by overlapping 'fields'—structured spaces of positions in which agents compete for field-specific forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). The educational field is particularly significant because it mediates between inherited social position and future life chances. Agents possessing abundant cultural capital (familiarity with academic discourse, access to supplementary educational resources) are systematically advantaged within the educational field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). NEP 2020's mandate for flexibility, portfolio-based assessment, and extracurricular achievement may inadvertently amplify these capital-related advantages, benefiting those whose habitus aligns with the new educational logic.

3.2 Durkheimian Structural Functionalism

Émile Durkheim's functionalist analysis of education as a mechanism of social solidarity and moral integration provides a complementary analytical lens. For Durkheim (1956), education functions to transmit society's core values and foster organic solidarity in differentiated modern societies. NEP 2020's emphasis on multidisciplinary learning, citizenship values, and cultural integration aligns with the functionalist conception of education as social glue. However, a Durkheimian critique would probe whether the policy's decentralized, choice-heavy architecture risks producing 'anomic' educational experiences for students from structurally vulnerable communities.

3.3 Critical Theory: Caste, Gender, and Power

Drawing additionally on the critical sociological tradition, particularly Ambedkarite anti-caste thought and feminist sociology, this study interrogates the power relations embedded within educational reform. NEP 2020 must be evaluated not only on its stated principles but also on how its provisions interact with the lived realities of Dalit, Adivasi, and gendered subjects in the Indian educational landscape.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), consisting of a quantitative survey phase followed by a qualitative interview phase. The quantitative data inform the breadth of sociological patterns, while the qualitative data deepen interpretive understanding of the mechanisms and meanings underlying those patterns.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

A total of 480 structured questionnaires were administered across five Indian states selected for their sociodemographic diversity: Uttar Pradesh (North India), Tamil Nadu (South India), Maharashtra (West), Rajasthan (Northwest), and Assam (Northeast). Purposive stratified sampling was used to ensure representation across urban, semi-urban, and rural locations; across gender; across caste categories (General, OBC, SC, ST); and across

educational roles (students, teachers, parents, and school administrators). Data were collected between August 2024 and December 2024.

In addition, 42 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants including school principals, district education officers, NGO representatives working in educational development, and representatives of marginalized communities. Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo 14 software.

4.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests of association, and binary logistic regression were employed to identify statistically significant relationships between sociodemographic variables and NEP 2020 awareness and readiness indices. Qualitative thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Sociodemographic Profile of the Sample

Variable	Category	n	Percentage (%)
Location	Urban	176	36.7
	Semi-Urban	152	31.7
	Rural	152	31.7
Gender	Male	242	50.4
	Female	228	47.5
	Non-Binary / Other	10	2.1
Caste Category	General	144	30.0
	OBC	139	29.0

	SC	112	23.3
	ST	85	17.7
Role	Student	192	40.0
	Teacher	144	30.0
	Parent	96	20.0
	Administrator	48	10.0

Table 1: Sociodemographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 480)

5.2 Awareness of NEP 2020 Across Pillars

Figure 1 presents awareness levels of six core NEP 2020 pillars disaggregated by urban and rural residence. The data reveal a consistent pattern: urban respondents demonstrate significantly higher awareness across all dimensions. The gap is most pronounced for digital literacy provisions (82% urban vs. 35% rural) and holistic development frameworks (78% urban vs. 42% rural). Multilingual education shows the narrowest gap (65% vs. 55%), likely reflecting rural communities' lived experience with language plurality.

These disparities are consistent with Chakraborty and Roy's (2024) finding that awareness of NEP 2020 is strongly mediated by cultural capital. Qualitative data reinforce this pattern: a secondary school teacher in rural Rajasthan observed, 'We heard about the new policy in a two-hour training, and then we were expected to transform our entire classroom approach. The gap between the policy document and our daily reality is enormous.'

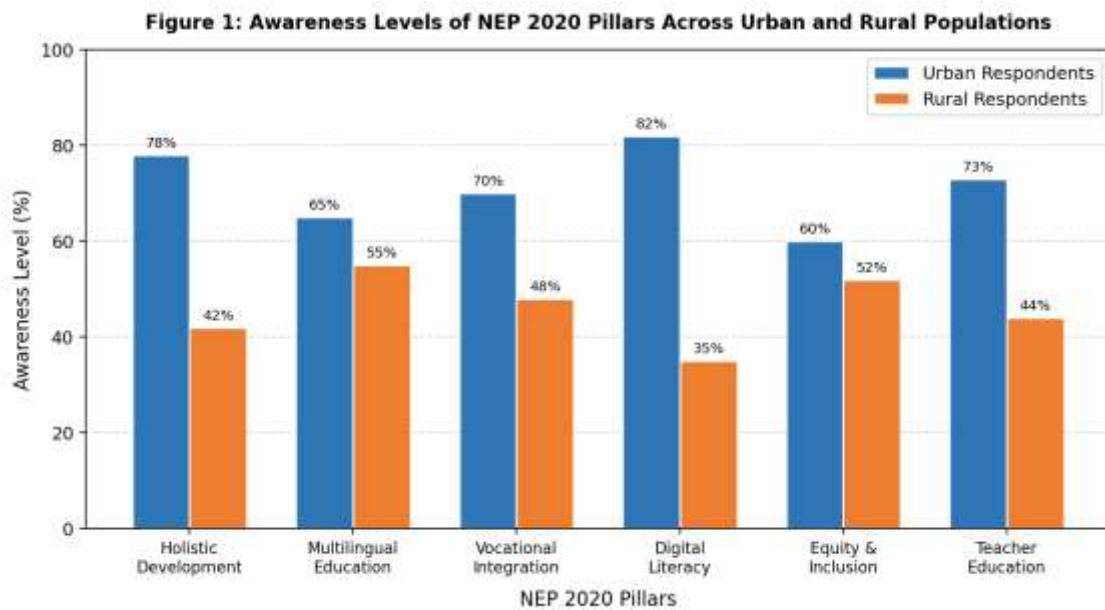


Figure 1: Awareness Levels of NEP 2020 Pillars Across Urban and Rural Populations

5.3 Sociological Barriers to NEP 2020 Implementation

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of perceived sociological barriers to NEP 2020 implementation as identified by respondents through both the structured questionnaire and qualitative interviews. Socioeconomic disparities constitute the largest barrier (28%), encompassing inadequate access to technology, private tutoring, and supplementary learning materials. Language barriers represent 20% of perceived obstacles, primarily affecting first-generation learners from tribal communities. Infrastructure deficits (18%), including inadequate school buildings, absent laboratories, and unreliable electricity, feature prominently among rural and peri-urban respondents.

Gender bias (14%) operates particularly through parental reluctance to invest in daughters' education beyond primary schooling—a finding corroborated by Kumari and Bhatt (2025). Caste and community resistance (11%) was articulated through accounts of discriminatory classroom practices and differential treatment of Dalit students by educators. Teacher capacity gaps (9%) reflect the shortage of trained personnel who can implement NEP 2020's competency-based learning architecture.

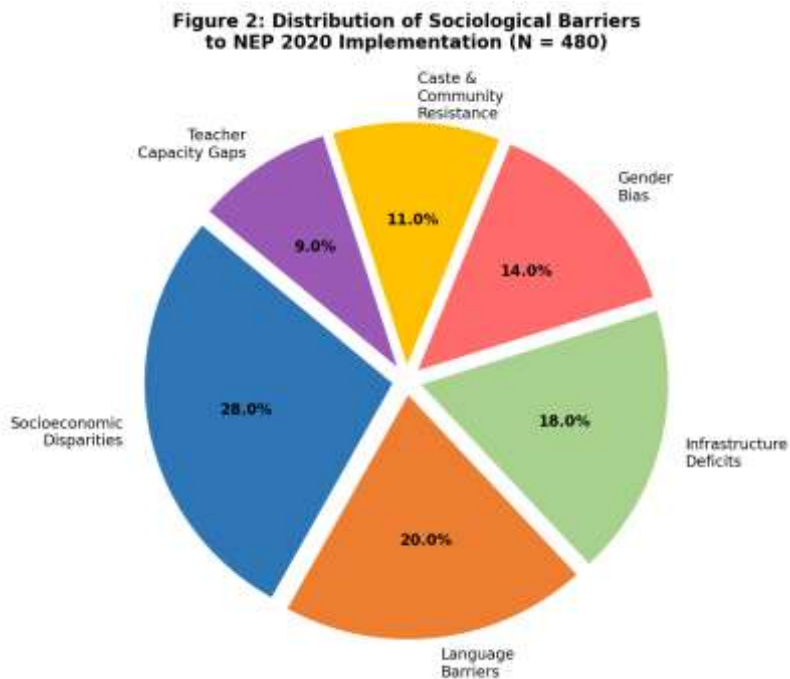


Figure 2: Distribution of Sociological Barriers to NEP 2020 Implementation (N = 480)

5.4 Caste, Gender, and NEP 2020 Readiness

Binary logistic regression analysis revealed that caste category and residential location are the strongest predictors of NEP 2020 readiness (defined as self-reported preparedness to engage with the new educational framework). Table 2 presents the key regression outcomes.

Predictor Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.
Location: Rural (ref. Urban)	-1.42	0.28	25.74	1	.000***
Caste: SC (ref. General)	-1.18	0.31	14.52	1	.000***
Caste: ST (ref. General)	-1.33	0.35	14.44	1	.000***
Gender: Female (ref. Male)	-0.54	0.24	5.06	1	.024*
Household Income (Low)	-0.89	0.27	10.88	1	.001**
Teacher Training Received	1.21	0.33	13.43	1	.000***

Table 2: Logistic Regression Predictors of NEP 2020 Readiness Note: * $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$**

The data confirm that Scheduled Tribe respondents experience the greatest readiness deficit ($B = -1.33, p < .001$), followed closely by Scheduled Caste respondents ($B = -1.18, p < .001$). Rural location independently reduces readiness probability ($B = -1.42, p < .001$), and being female is a statistically significant negative predictor ($B = -0.54, p < .024$). Teacher training receipt is the strongest positive predictor ($B = 1.21, p < .001$), underscoring the centrality of professional development in bridging implementation gaps.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these findings illuminate the reproduction function of education: despite NEP 2020's emancipatory rhetoric, the structural conditions that shape readiness reproduce existing social hierarchies. Students and communities with abundant cultural and social capital are systematically better positioned to leverage the policy's provisions.

5.5 Linguistic Identity and the Three-Language Formula

The three-language formula, a central provision of NEP 2020 in school education, elicits complex sociological responses. Among respondents from linguistically minority communities—particularly Adivasi populations in Assam and Jharkhand—there is cautious optimism about mother-tongue instruction in the early grades (Grades 1–5), but deep anxiety about the transition to regional language and English in later grades. An interview respondent, a primary schoolteacher from a Bodo community in Assam, articulated: 'For the first time, we are seeing children learn to read in their own language. But when they move to the next school, there are no books, no teachers—they are lost again.'

This finding resonates with Mohanty (2024) and Srivastava and Dey (2025), both of whom emphasize that linguistic equity requires not merely policy mandate but sustained investment in minority-language educational materials, curriculum development, and teacher preparation. The sociological risk of abandoning this investment is the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies that privilege Hindi and English speakers in competitive domains.

5.6 Digital Divide and Technology Access

NEP 2020's embrace of technology-enabled education—through its National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) and Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) platform—is accompanied by stark digital equity challenges. Among rural

respondents in this study, only 29% reported reliable internet access at home, and only 35% reported familiarity with the DIKSHA platform. This contrasts sharply with urban respondents, among whom 81% reported reliable internet access and 72% were familiar with DIKSHA.

Table 3 presents a cross-tabulation of digital access by location and caste category, revealing compounding disadvantages for SC/ST respondents in rural areas.

Category	Internet Access (%)	Smartphone (%)	DIKSHA Familiar (%)	Online Learning (%)	n
Urban – General	91	88	80	76	72
Urban – SC/ST	64	59	55	48	48
Rural – General	48	44	40	33	60
Rural – OBC	32	31	28	22	72
Rural – SC/ST	19	18	12	10	128

Table 3: Digital Access Indicators by Location and Caste Category

The data reveal a stark compounding disadvantage: rural SC/ST respondents report the lowest levels of internet access (19%), smartphone availability (18%), and DIKSHA platform familiarity (12%). Singh et al. (2024) contextualize this finding within global evidence that technology-mediated education reforms tend to widen rather than close equity gaps in the absence of targeted infrastructure investment.

6. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of this study converge on a central sociological tension: NEP 2020 is a policy of ambitious emancipatory vision confronting a social structure characterized

by deep and overlapping inequalities. This tension is not unique to India—Kumar and Rustagi (2023) observe a comparable pattern in educational reform movements in Brazil and South Africa—but it carries particular urgency in the Indian context given the scale of social heterogeneity and historical marginalization.

From a Bourdieusian standpoint, the policy's emphasis on flexibility, portfolio-based assessment, and student-driven learning pathways may function as a mechanism of capital reproduction. Families with high cultural capital possess the social networks, economic resources, and educational familiarity to strategically navigate flexible systems. Families lacking cultural capital experience the same flexibility as daunting uncertainty rather than liberating opportunity. This dynamic is corroborated by qualitative data in this study: parents in rural and lower-caste households frequently expressed confusion about the new assessment framework and uncertainty about how to support their children's learning.

The Durkheimian lens highlights a different dimension: the risk of educational anomie in communities where the normative frameworks governing schooling are rapidly disrupted by policy change without adequate institutional support. Durkheim (1956) emphasized that education must be grounded in shared norms and communal solidarity. When policy mandates outpace community readiness, the result is not transformation but disorientation.

The findings regarding teacher training receipt as the strongest positive predictor of readiness (Table 2) carry significant policy implications. Across sociological frameworks, the teacher-as-mediator occupies a pivotal position: teachers translate policy intention into pedagogical practice and possess the capacity to mitigate or amplify the equity effects of reform. Systematic investment in contextually relevant, caste-aware, and linguistically sensitive teacher professional development is therefore not a supplementary consideration but a foundational requirement for sociologically equitable implementation.

The digital divide data (Table 3) underscore the risk of what Nambissan (2023) terms 'digital feudalism'—a scenario in which technology-mediated education creates a two-tier system, with well-resourced students benefiting from digital enhancement while marginalized students fall further behind. This risk is not hypothetical: respondents from rural SC/ST backgrounds reported digital access rates less than one-fifth those of urban General category respondents.

7. SOCIOLOGICALLY INFORMED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical and theoretical analysis, the following evidence-based recommendations are advanced:

- **Equity-Targeted Professional Development:** Teacher training programs must be mandated, fully funded, and designed with explicit attention to caste, gender, and linguistic context. Training should incorporate anti-caste pedagogy, mother-tongue instructional strategies, and digital inclusion methods.
- **Digital Infrastructure as a Rights Issue:** The digital access disparities documented in Table 3 constitute educational rights violations. The government must guarantee broadband connectivity and device access for all students in rural and tribal areas as a prerequisite for NEP 2020's technology provisions.
- **Community Engagement and Participatory Implementation:** NEP 2020's School Management Committees should be revitalized with genuine decision-making power, ensuring that Dalit, Adivasi, and women community members have substantive—not merely procedural—voices in local educational governance.
- **Minority Language Educational Resources:** Sustained investment in textbook development, curriculum design, and teacher preparation in minority and tribal languages is essential to realize the multilingual education mandate without producing educational continuity gaps.
- **Gender-Responsive NEP Implementation:** The Gender Inclusion Fund must be operationalized with transparent accountability mechanisms and monitored for its impact on enrollment, retention, and learning outcomes of girls in rural areas and gender-marginalized communities.
- **Longitudinal Sociological Monitoring:** NEP 2020 implementation should be accompanied by rigorous, longitudinal sociological monitoring systems that track equity indicators—disaggregated by caste, gender, location, and income—at regular intervals to enable evidence-based course correction.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a comprehensive sociological investigation of NEP 2020, integrating empirical data from 480 survey respondents and 42 qualitative interviews with theoretical analysis through Bourdieusian field theory, Durkheimian functionalism, and critical anti-caste and feminist sociology. The findings reveal a complex landscape: NEP 2020 represents a genuinely progressive vision of education that holds significant potential to democratize learning, honor cultural and linguistic diversity, and build a more skilled and equitable society. However, this potential is not automatic—it is contingent upon the social conditions in which the policy is implemented.

The data demonstrate that awareness, readiness, and projected benefit of NEP 2020 are systematically distributed along pre-existing axes of social inequality, with rural

populations, SC/ST communities, women, and low-income households consistently reporting lower engagement and higher barriers. The digital divide represents a particularly acute risk of reproducing inequality in a new technological register. Teacher capacity and community engagement emerge as the most powerful levers for equitable implementation.

As India advances through the phased implementation of NEP 2020, the sociological dimensions of this reform deserve as much attention as its administrative and pedagogical dimensions. Transformative educational policy, to fulfill its emancipatory promise, must be accompanied by transformative social investment—in infrastructure, in professional capacity, in community participation, and in the structural conditions that shape who benefits from education and who is left behind.

Future research should conduct longitudinal tracking of NEP 2020 outcomes across the sociodemographic variables examined in this study, particularly as the school examination reforms and higher education restructuring provisions come into full effect by 2030. International comparative studies examining how other plurilingual, multi-caste, or post-colonial societies have navigated comparable reform dynamics will further enrich the sociological scholarship on educational transformation.

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