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Article

Implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) under the National Education Policy 2020 in India: A Policy Perspective

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Abstract:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the foundational stage of schooling within the new 5+3+3+4 educational structure and aims to achieve universal access to quality pre-primary education by 2030. Achieving this goal requires substantial reforms in India's existing ECCE system, which is primarily delivered through the Anganwadi network under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme. The commitment is further reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2, which seeks universal access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030. This study examines the implementation of ECCE under NEP 2020 across India, focusing on the alignment between national policy objectives and institutional realities, with selected state-level examples, including Bihar. Using a qualitative Policy Document Analysis (PDA) approach, the study analyzes NEP 2020, Aadharshila and Navchetana curricular frameworks, the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCFFS, 2022), the ECCE Task Force Report, ASER data, and recent scholarly literature. Findings reveal persistent challenges related to infrastructure, workforce capacity, curriculum transition, inter-ministerial coordination, data systems, and equity despite major initiatives such as NIPUN Bharat (2021), Aadharshila and Navchetana (2024), and ITEP (2023). The study concludes that meaningful ECCE reform requires legal inclusion under the RTE Act, equitable funding, decentralized planning, continuous teacher development, culturally responsive curricula, and sustained political and administrative commitment.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education, National Education Policy 2020, India, Anganwadi, Foundational Stage, Policy Implementation, Educational Equity, SDG 4.2

1. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is widely seen as the most critical phase of human development. It shapes the cognitive, language, socio-emotional, and physical foundations on which later learning depends. Research in neurobiology, economics, and child development highlights the importance of the early years for lifelong outcomes, with most rapid brain development taking place by around age five (Haartsen et al., 2016; Barnett, 1995). Secure relationships and good quality early learning opportunities lead to long term gains in behaviour, learning, and mental and physical health. Many studies also show that investment in the first six years of life brings higher returns than investment at any later stage (Currie & Thomas, 1995; Kaul et al., 2023; Jha et al., 2018). Early childhood, from birth to six years, is therefore regarded as a key period for physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and motor development (Kaul & Sankar, 2008; Kaul, 2019; Kumar, 2023). Because children's brains grow very quickly between ages one and eight, this is a particularly important window for education.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 clearly identifies ECCE as the first and most important stage in the new 5+3+3+4 school structure, which replaces the earlier 10+2 pattern (MoE, 2020). As Mondal and Mondal (2025) note, "the Government of India took a giant leap ahead with the announcement of its latest national education policy in 2020, after nearly three decades since the last major revision was made to the second national education policy of 1986 in 1992," and in this policy ECCE is viewed as the foundation of a child's holistic development. NEP 2020 commits India to universal provision of good quality early childhood development, care, and education by 2030, so that all children entering Grade 1 are ready for school (MoE, 2020). This is also a sub-goal under SDG 4.2, which links India's domestic reform agenda with its global education commitments (Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

India's current ECCE system is built mainly around the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, started in 1975. It operates through about 1.3 to 1.4 million Anganwadi centres and is estimated to reach around 70 million beneficiaries, making it one of the largest early childhood programmes in the world (Nayak & Koushik, 2025; MWCD, 2025). For most of its history, this system has focused more on nutrition and health than on structured early learning. Anganwadi workers handle many administrative and service delivery tasks, which reduces the time and energy they can give to teaching and play-based activities (Nayak & Koushik, 2025). NEP 2020 aims to rebalance this by calling for curriculum reform, staff upskilling, and closer institutional coordination between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD).

However, Mondal and Mondal (2025) point out that post policy efforts "largely centre around formulation of curriculum and teachers' training on the latest curricula, rather [are] silent on the up-gradation of ECCE in terms of equitable access to quality ECCE-providing institutions, recruitment drive of teachers and teachers' salary," which points to a deeper mismatch between goals and actual measures.

Implementation of NEP 2020's ECCE vision varies widely across India. Some states, such as Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Gujarat, have set up dedicated pre-primary grades in government primary schools and have retrained existing teachers. States with large and mostly rural child populations face much tougher challenges (Banerji, 2024). Bihar is a well documented case of this second group. The 2011 Census reported a literacy rate of 63.82% in Bihar compared with a national average of 74.04% (Census of India, 2011). District level research describes rural ECCE services in Bihar as "fragmented and underdeveloped," with many centres used mainly as childcare rather than as structured learning spaces (Singh & Roy, 2025).

In this context, the present study offers a policy based analysis of how ECCE under NEP 2020 is being implemented across India. It brings together policy documents, national curricular frameworks, reports from government and civil society, and recent academic work. It looks at (a) the policy design for ECCE set out in NEP 2020, (b) the broader institutional and resource context at the national level, with Bihar used as one state example, and (c) the main gaps, tensions, and openings visible in implementation so far. The study adds to wider debates on transformative pedagogy by exploring how a national policy vision is shaped by local institutional conditions (Khullar & Ray, 2026; Nirala, 2025).

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This analysis is organised around three linked conceptual strands: developmental readiness theory, the policy implementation gap, and a focus on equity and institutional convergence that has recently become central in Indian ECCE research.

2.1. Developmental Readiness and Child-Centred Pedagogy

The pedagogical basis for NEP 2020's ECCE provisions comes from constructivist and developmental theories of early learning. Piaget's description of the pre-operational stage suggests that young children learn best through symbolic play, sensory experience, and direct hands-on interaction with their environment, rather than through abstract or rote teaching (Singh & Roy, 2025). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and in particular the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development, highlights that learning is most effective when adults or peers support children as they work on tasks that are slightly beyond what they can do alone (Singh & Roy, 2025). These ideas lie behind NEP 2020's focus on "play-activity-discovery-based learning" in the Foundational Stage, which is described as "comprehensive, integrated, experiential, flexible, contextual, multi-faceted, play-activity-oriented and inquiry-based in nature" (MoE, 2020, p. 7; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCFFS, 2022) further stresses that successful pedagogy depends on a "sound learning environment, linkage of ECCE with children's lives and their culture, play-based activities and a robust teacher-child rapport" (NCERT, 2022, as cited in Mondal & Mondal, 2025). This child-centred orientation is in line with current approaches such as dialogic pedagogy, which puts learners and their lived experiences at the heart of the classroom (Parey, 2025), and with the broader shift from pedagogy to heutagogy in teacher education (P, 2026)

2.2. The Policy Implementation Gap

The second conceptual lens is the familiar gap between what policies say and what actually happens once they are rolled out, especially in large federal systems. Policy Document Analysis (PDA) is defined as "a method for investigating the nature of a policy document in order to look at both what lies behind it and within it" (Cardno, 2016, p. 625). PDA provides the basic research approach used in this study and is also used by Mondal and Mondal (2025), whose work is currently the

most detailed review of NEP 2020's ECCE provisions. The Report of the Task Force on ECCE (MWCD, 2022) acknowledges that Anganwadi workers have long been responsible for early learning, but that they operate under "major limitations and challenges" such as "poor institutional capacity and inadequacy of budgets for conducting suitable professional development."

2.3. Equity and Institutional Convergence

The third lens concerns equity and the long standing separation between the Anganwadi system run by MWCD and the school system run by MoE. Mondal and Mondal (2025) show that "post-policy national curriculum on ECCE framed by multiple ministries and bodies are clashing with each other," which leads to fragmentation rather than coherence. Enrolment in Anganwadi centres and private pre-schools differs across rural and urban areas, income groups, wealth levels, geographic regions, types of ECCE programmes, and states. It is also shaped by parental aspirations (Creches, 2020; Rao et al., 2021a; Kaul & Sharma, 2018). ASER 2024 data indicate that 20.7% of three-year-olds, 11.4% of four-year-olds, and 6.2% of five-year-olds in rural India are not enrolled in any pre-school or ECE centre (Banerji, 2024). This underlines the size of the access gap.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIMS

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the principal policy provisions that NEP 2020 establishes for ECCE, and what institutional architecture do they presuppose?

RQ2: To what extent does India's existing ECCE delivery infrastructure align with the institutional architecture envisaged by NEP 2020, and how does this alignment vary across states?

RQ3: What are the principal implementation gaps and constraints affecting ECCE reform across India, with particular reference to infrastructure, workforce, curriculum, governance, data, and equity?

RQ4: What policy and pedagogical implications can be drawn for transformative, equitable ECCE implementation in India in line with SDG 4.2?

The overarching aim is to provide policymakers, teacher educators, and researchers with a synthesised, evidence-based perspective on the state of ECCE policy translation in India, framed within the broader discourse on transformative pedagogy and learner engagement.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

The study uses a qualitative Policy Document Analysis (PDA) design (Cardno, 2016), similar to that used by Mondal and Mondal (2025) in their review of NEP 2020 and ECCE. PDA follows a structured process of document selection, data extraction, analysis and interpretation, and synthesis. It is useful for examining how policy aims are expressed, how they are supported through related frameworks, and how they are understood by researchers and civil society. This approach is particularly appropriate for studying education policy and its links with wider social norms, as shown in recent work on textbook rationalisation and representations of social justice (Bushra, 2026).

4.2. Sources of Data

The primary policy text examined is the National Education Policy 2020 (MoE, 2020). Supplementary sources include: (a) national curricular and capacity-building frameworks the NCFFS (NCERT, 2022), Aadharshila, and Navchetana (PIB, 2024a; NIPCCD, 2024a, NIPCCD, 2024b); (b) the Report of the ECCE Task Force (MWCD, 2022); (c) the NIPUN Bharat guidelines (MoE, 2021); (d) ASER household survey evidence (Banerji, 2024; Bhattacharjea, 2022); (e) the UNICEF India ECCE guidance (UNICEF, n.d..); (f) institutional reports from the American India Foundation (Anand & Anand, 2024); (g) peer-reviewed journal articles on the national ECCE reality post-NEP, and foundational ECCE.

4.3. Analytical Approach

Sources were analysed thematically across five domains: access and infrastructure, curriculum and pedagogy, workforce development, governance and convergence, and monitoring and equity. For each area, national policy provisions were read against the available evidence on implementation. Examples from specific states, especially Bihar, were used to show how national policies play out within particular institutional settings. The analysis gives priority to sources that deal explicitly with the national ECCE system, while using state-level material to show variation and concrete practice.

4.4. Limitations

As a document-based policy analysis, this study does not generate new primary data. State-disaggregated quantitative data were not uniformly accessible across all states, limiting the granularity of cross-state comparisons. State-specific scholarly

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literature remains uneven, with more detailed accounts available for some states than others.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. The Policy Architecture of NEP 2020 for ECCE

NEP 2020 places ECCE at the start of the 5+3+3+4 system. The Foundational Stage consists of three years of preschool for ages three to six, plus Grades 1 and 2 (MoE, 2020). Mondal and Mondal (2025) group the policy's ECCE provisions into three broad areas: curriculum and pedagogy, universal access, and equitable quality.

On curriculum and pedagogy, NEP 2020 proposes that curricula should be reshaped to match developmental stages, with an explicit emphasis on Indian ethos and twenty-first century skills (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). The ECCE curriculum aims at outcomes in five domains: physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development, and the development of communication, early language, literacy, and numeracy (MoE, 2020, p. 7). The National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for ECCE (NCPFECCE) was commissioned from NCERT in two parts, one for 0-3 year olds and one for 3-8 year olds. It is intended to build on India's long tradition of early childhood education while drawing on recent research and international practice (MoE, 2020, p. 7; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

On universal access, NEP 2020 specifies four institutional delivery vehicles: (a) standalone Anganwadis; (b) Anganwadis co-located with primary schools; (c) pre-primary schools/sections covering at least ages five to six co-located with existing primary schools; and (d) stand-alone pre-schools (MoE, 2020; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Before age five, every child will move to a "Preparatory Class" or "Balavatika," equipped with ECCE-qualified teachers and a play-based learning environment (MoE, 2020, p. 7). NCERT and SCERTs are directed to develop a three-month play-based "school preparation module" for Grade 1 pupils to bridge the readiness gap (MoE, 2020).

On equitable quality, the policy calls for Anganwadi Centres to be upgraded with better buildings, adequate play materials, trained staff, and child friendly spaces (MoE, 2020; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Anganwadi staff are expected to have at least 10+2 plus a six month ECCE certificate, or if below 10+2, a one year ECCE diploma. States are responsible for setting up systems for stage specific training, mentoring, and career progression.

5.2. Post-NEP Developments: A Review

Since NEP 2020, the Union Government has introduced several ECCE related initiatives. Mondal and Mondal (2025) give a detailed overview of these, which is central to the present analysis.

NCERT's National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCFFS, 2022) is the first integrated curriculum framework for ages 3-8 in India. It follows the 5+3+3+4 structure of NEP 2020 (NCERT, 2022). The NCFFS sets goals in five developmental domains: physical development, social-emotional and ethical development, cognitive development, aesthetic and cultural development, and language and literacy. Each domain has associated competencies (NCERT, 2022). Mondal and Mondal (2025) stress that the framework will only work if there is an enabling learning environment, regular play-based activities, a connection between ECCE and children's home lives and cultures, and strong teacher-child relationships.

The Union Ministry of Education launched NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat in July 2021 as a national mission to achieve foundational literacy and numeracy for every child by Grade 3 by 2026-27 (MoE, 2021). The Vidya Pravesh module, a three-month play-based School Preparation Module for the first three months of Grade 1, was developed by NCERT in July 2021; however, its implementation at the state level may not succeed due to resource constraints, inadequacy of trained teachers for play-based learning, digital divide, and limited parent-community engagement (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). MWCD created a National ECCE Taskforce in March 2022 to recommend practical steps for strengthening Anganwadis (MWCD, 2022). The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) launched the four-year Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) in 57 institutions from 2023-24. Mondal and Mondal (2025) note that this number is far below what is needed to staff the new 5+3+3+4 system (PIB, 2023; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

In 2024, MWCD released Aadharshila, a National Curriculum for ECCE for ages 3-6, and Navchetana, a National Framework for Early Childhood Stimulation for birth to three years. Both were developed by NIPCCD (PIB, 2024a; NIPCCD, 2024a; NIPCCD, 2024b). In the same year, earlier ECCE related schemes were brought together into three clusters: Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, Mission Shakti, and Mission Vatsalya (PIB, 2024b). NIPCCD now leads training for Anganwadi staff on these frameworks (PIB, 2024b).

Despite these steps, Mondal and Mondal (2025) conclude that the reforms "largely centre around formulation of curriculum and teachers' training on the latest curricula, rather silent on the up-gradation of ECCE in terms of equitable access to quality ECCE-providing institutions, recruitment drive of teachers and teachers' salary. State-sponsored fund allocation for revamping the landscape of ECCE has not yet been addressed. Moreover, alignment among the interventions of multiple ministries and bodies in ECCE is not unified and shared, but rather fragmented."

5.3. The Existing Delivery Infrastructure and Its Limitations

The main platform for implementing NEP 2020's ECCE vision is the ICDS Anganwadi network (Nayak & Koushik, 2025). Even after reorganisation under Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 (PIB, 2024b), many studies describe public ECCE infrastructure as lagging behind policy ambitions. Nayak and Koushik (2025) link this slowdown to the original design of ICDS, in which education was secondary to nutrition. Anganwadi workers often struggle to juggle administrative tasks and services with time for play-based teaching. ASER 2024 data show that 20.7% of three year olds, 11.4% of four year olds, and 6.2% of five year olds in rural India are not enrolled in any preschool or ECCE centre (Banerji, 2024). Even though the number of ICDS projects and Anganwadi centres grew between 2016-17 and 2021-22, MWCD data show a steady drop in enrolment of 3-6 year olds in preschools (Bhattacharjea, 2022; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

Many ECCE centres face difficulties in including children from very poor backgrounds, historically marginalised communities, and children with disabilities. Basic infrastructure is often inadequate, with a lack of ramps, wheelchairs, and specialised equipment, and limited access to rehabilitation services in rural and low income settings (Creches, 2020; Rao et al., 2021b; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). On the workforce side, about 5.62 lakh of roughly 13.15 lakh Anganwadi workers had completed NEP-aligned training by mid 2025 (Career360, 2026). At this pace, full training coverage by 2030 seems unlikely. ECCE work is generally seen as low status, with poor pay, weak pre-service training, and almost no clear career track (Rao et al., 2021a; Creches, 2020). This undermines efforts to improve ECCE quality nationwide.

A qualitative study in Bihar by John et al., (2020) shows that Anganwadi workers handle both "product-oriented services" such as distributing take home rations and organising immunisation days, and "information-oriented services" such as nutrition counselling. Little time is left for structured teaching. At the national level, fewer than half of mothers and children currently receive basic nutrition services, and India would need more than 6 billion US dollars annually to ensure full coverage (Avula et al., 2016). These pressures directly affect what Anganwadi staff can do in terms of early learning.

5.4. State-Level Variation: The Case of Bihar

Mondal and Mondal (2025) emphasise that regional diversity makes uniform implementation difficult. They note that nationwide schemes are often applied in a "one-size-fits-all approach with limited flexibility" and therefore "have certainly struggled to gain success." Bihar shows how this plays out in practice in a state with a large rural population and historically low education indicators. Singh and Roy (2025), studying rural ECCE in Bhagalpur district, describe services as "fragmented and underdeveloped." They point to a lack of trained ECCE staff, poor infrastructure, weak access for rural and marginalised communities, and limited parental awareness. Using UDISE 2021-22 data, they show that pre-primary enrolment in rural Bihar is "alarmingly low," with many centres used mainly for childcare, and "formal rote-based teaching still predominant" in classrooms. Bihar's literacy rate of 63.82% in the 2011 Census, well below the national average, reflects this deeper challenge (Census of India, 2011). In contrast, states such as Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Gujarat have introduced specific pre-primary grades and retrained primary teachers to work with younger children (Banerji, 2024). These examples show possible routes that Bihar has not yet adopted at a sufficient scale. Singh and Roy (2025) also outline a contextualised teacher training model, first piloted in a DIET in Jammu and Kashmir and later adapted for Bhagalpur. The model focuses on collaborative learning, use of local materials, reflective teaching, and child-centred pedagogy consistent with NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat. Although designed for Bihar, it addresses a wider national gap in workforce development. Scaling it up would require deliberate integration into SCERT and DIET in service programmes (Asagar, 2025).

5.5. Locating the Challenges: Policy and Post-NEP Phase

Drawing on Mondal and Mondal's (2025) systematic analysis, this study identifies six interconnected challenge clusters:

First, regional diversity: A single uniform policy design offers little flexibility in the face of India's diversity in language, culture, and state capacity (Kaul & Sharma, 2018; Creches, 2020). Enrolment patterns differ by rural or urban location, income and wealth, geography, type of programme, region, and parental aspirations (Rao et al., 2021a; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

Second, language of instruction: NEP 2020 states that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5... will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language" (MoE, 2020, p. 13). Panchal et al., (2023) and Mondal and Mondal (2025) argue that the lack of clarity in this wording can undermine both access and retention. The policy does not confront the differences between home tongue, mother tongue, local language, and regional language, and how these play out in multilingual states. For many ethnic minority children, gaps between the language spoken at home and the language used at school can reinforce disadvantage (MRG & UNICEF, 2009).

Third, teacher preparation and professionalisation: NEP 2020 supports the idea of well-qualified ECCE staff, but does not clearly spell out a state funded system for training and certifying these educators (Malik & Hasan, 2024; Rao et al., 2021a). More than 90% of Teacher Education Institutions are private, and they are unevenly distributed across states (CECED, 2011). Combined with low wages and few career opportunities, this contributes to the perception of ECCE as low status work and creates a major structural barrier (Rao et al., 2021a; Creches, 2020).

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Fourth, interministerial coordination and data: MWCD is responsible for ECCE overall, while MoE looks mainly after schooling. Agencies such as NCERT, NCTE, and NIPCCD work on training. This leads to separate ECCE curricula across agencies that, as Mondal and Mondal (2025) put it, "are clashing with each other." Data collection is also fragmented, as ministries use different indicators and there is little coverage of unregulated private preschools (Rao et al., 2021a; Crouch et al., 2020; Maithreyi et al., 2018). Education for All in India (2025) notes that Anganwadis are not yet part of UDISE+, which makes it impossible to track children across ECCE and primary school in a single system (Khullar & Ray, 2026).

Fifth, funding: NEP 2020 talks about recruiting specially trained ECCE staff, but does not specify the budget needed to make this national (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Kundu et al. (2022) estimate that India would need to spend about Rs 32,500 per child per year in Anganwadis and Rs 46,000 per child per year in kindergarten sections, with around 1.5-2.2% of GDP set aside for ECCE, to achieve universal coverage by 2030. Current arrangements share responsibility between the Union and state governments, but often in piecemeal ways that may weaken the idea of ECCE as an inclusive system (Suresh, 2019; Rao et al., 2021a). Sethi and Mahajan (2021) point out that overall public spending on education still falls short of the long recommended 6% of GDP.

Sixth, preference for private English medium preschools: NEP 2020 says little about parents' growing preference for English medium private preschools (Kaul, 2014; Alcott et al., 2019; Rao et al., 2021a). Many public Anganwadis struggle to provide a rich educational experience, largely because of weak infrastructure and a shortage of play materials and classroom resources (Creches, 2020; Panchal et al., 2023; Malik & Hasan, 2024; Mondal & Mondal, 2025; Bhadoria, 2024).

5.6. ASER Evidence on Pre-School Participation

The ASER Centre tracks enrolment in Anganwadi centres, government pre-primary sections, and private LKG/UKG classes. ASER 2024 shows that 20.7% of three year olds, 11.4% of four year olds, and 6.2% of five year olds in rural India are still not enrolled in any type of preschool or ECCE centre (Banerji, 2024). This is happening even though ICDS coverage has grown. MWCD statistics indicate that the number of 3-6 year olds attending preschools has declined between 2016-17 and 2021-22 (Bhattacharjea, 2022; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). This points to a gap between building infrastructure and actually enrolling and retaining children. ASER also notes that in states where government primary schools have introduced pre-primary classes, existing primary teachers have been reassigned to teach younger children. Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Gujarat are key examples (Banerji, 2024). Their experience may offer practical lessons for other states.

5.7. Conceptual Framework: The ECCE Foundation Pyramid

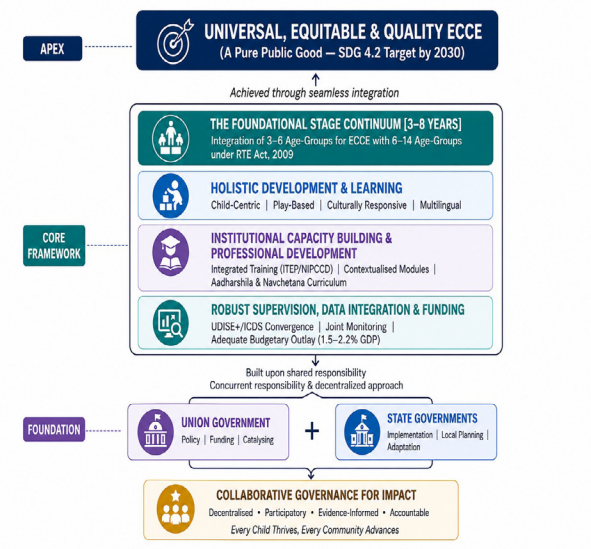

Figure 1: *ECCE Foundation Pyramid for Integrated Early Learning in India under NEP 2020*

Source: Adapted from Mondal & Mondal (2025); Authors' compilation

Following the analysis above and the model set out by Mondal and Mondal (2025), Figure 1 presents the ECCE Foundation Pyramid for integrated early learning under NEP 2020. The pyramid shows the different layers required to achieve universal, equitable, and good quality ECCE. The base is the shared responsibility of the Union and state governments. Above this are institutional capacity building, a holistic child centred curriculum, and the Foundational Stage continuum. The top of the pyramid represents universal, equitable, high-quality ECCE as a public good linked to SDG 4.2 by 2030.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that NEP 2020 offers a clear and ambitious policy design for ECCE. It answers long standing criticism of the Anganwadi system's main focus on nutrition and health by putting forward a strong, play-based and constructivist curriculum for early learning. The years since NEP 2020 have seen the development of NCFFS 2022, NIPUN Bharat, Aadharshila, Navchetana, and ITEP 2023, together marking an unusually active period for ECCE policy. However, the evidence indicates that moving from policy design to practice is difficult across almost all areas.

In terms of access and infrastructure, Kumar and Singh (2025) argue that most Anganwadi centres, particularly in rural areas, are not equipped as NEP 2020 envisages. ASER 2024 shows that more than one in five three year olds in rural India is still not in any kind of preschool (Banerji, 2024). Reaching universal access by 2030, which is now close, will need a very sharp increase in pace rather than gradual improvement. In states such as Bihar, where many centres function more like childcare facilities than learning spaces (Singh & Roy, 2025), the gap is especially large.

On curriculum and pedagogy, the development of Aadharshila and NCFFS 2022 is a step forward. Yet their effectiveness depends heavily on classroom conditions, especially on staff capacity and language fit. Mondal and Mondal (2025) note that the success of NCFFS depends on sound learning environments, play-based activities, and strong teacher-child relationships. These conditions are often missing in poorly resourced Anganwadis. The continued use of rote methods in many rural classrooms (Singh & Roy, 2025; Kaul et al., 2023) shows that changing documents is not enough to change practice. Work on dialogic pedagogy and on building teachers' digital skills (Asagar, 2025; Parey, 2025) may help bridge this gap.

On the workforce front, the fact that less than half of Anganwadi workers had completed NEP aligned training by mid 2025 (Career360, 2026) highlights a serious delay between policy announcements and staff preparedness. Anganwadi workers are often treated as volunteers rather than formal employees (Sethi & Mahajan, 2021), with low pay and very limited promotion prospects. This undermines professionalisation. Mondal and Mondal (2025) argue that ECCE needs a shift from informal or part-time staff to permanent, reasonably paid teachers with decent working conditions. Singh and Roy's (2025) contextualised training model offers a flexible, scalable approach that can support this aim.

With regard to governance and convergence, the current post-NEP landscape remains fragmented. Different ministries and agencies are producing overlapping ECCE curricula and guidelines that are not always aligned (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). MWCD's 2025 guidelines on co-locating Anganwadis and schools are a step in the right direction (Education for All in India, 2025). To become meaningful, however, convergence must include joint planning, budgeting, and monitoring at district and block levels, supported by shared digital platforms (Khullar & Ray, 2026). The absence of Anganwadi data in UDISE+ prevents continuous tracking of children as they move from ECCE to primary school (Education for All in India, 2025).

On equity, a clear divide has emerged between a growing fee-charging private preschool sector and the underfunded public Anganwadi system (Bhadoria, 2024; Sethi & Mahajan, 2021). This raises concerns that ECCE reforms could further widen inequalities based on income and location. Mondal and Mondal (2025) argue that including the 3-6 age group in the RTE Act, 2009, is necessary to ensure that both Union and state governments are jointly responsible for providing ECCE as a public good and to better align the 3-6 and 6-14 age groups. This overlaps with broader discussions on social justice and historical inequalities in India (Nirala, 2025; Sonish, 2025).

Taken together, these findings suggest that NEP 2020's ECCE provisions now serve more as a standard against which state efforts can be judged than as a fully operational blueprint. The potential shift from mainly custodial care in Anganwadis to rich, play-based early learning is visible in policy, but in many parts of the country is still only partially realised. At the same time, grounded innovations such as those described by Singh and Roy (2025) in Bihar show that change is possible when policy ideas are adapted to local realities.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ECCE REFORM

Building on this analysis and on the future directions suggested by Mondal and Mondal (2025), several implications emerge:

First, promote decentralised and participatory planning based on local realities. Post policy reforms need to take into account current developmental theory, social needs, cultural traditions, and regional diversity (Vengopal, 2014; MWCD, 2022). Solid data that describe the current situation and can guide decisions are essential (Banerji, 2024; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

Second, extend the Right to Education Act, 2009, to cover ages 3-6. This would bring ECCE for 3-6 year olds fully within a rights framework, align it more closely with schooling for ages 6-14, and fix responsibility on both Union and state governments to provide ECCE as a public good across India (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). The Foundational Stage should be treated as a continuous phase, not just in terms of curriculum but also in relation to resources, training, teaching, supervision, and evaluation.

Third, embed developmentally, contextually, and culturally appropriate curricula and pedagogy. Given India's diversity, curricula need to be flexible and grounded in children's age, development, and socio-cultural context (Kaul & Bhattacharjea, 2019; NAEYC, 2009; MWCD, 2022). Elements such as yoga, local music and arts, sustained engagement, cooperative learning, coordinated development of "head, heart, and hand," and the use of locally available materials can support holistic development (Vengopal, 2014; MWCD, 2022; Bal, 2025). Inclusive practices that avoid discrimination and ensure equal opportunities are central for reaching all 3-6 year olds, regardless of disability, gender, caste, language, community, location, or income (Bal, 2025; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

Fourth, professionalise ECCE educators. States should introduce a publicly funded, standardised, short term but context sensitive training package, aligned with ITEP, through a sufficient number of government teacher education institutions (NCERT, n.d.; NCTE, 2019). ECCE staffing should move away from casual or part-time arrangements towards permanent, adequately paid positions with clear career paths (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Contextualised, peer-led, and reflective training models such as the one proposed by Singh and Roy (2025) can extend the reach of formal training, especially if built into SCERT and DIET programmes.

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Fifth, create a strong regulatory and monitoring framework. As NEP 2020 suggests, India needs a system for regulating and accrediting all preschool programmes, whether run by government, private organisations, or NGOs (NCERT, n.d.). Digital tools such as ICDS Common Application Software for real-time monitoring, wider use of ICT in Anganwadis, and partnerships with the private sector could improve tracking and support (GoI, 2018; Rao et al., 2021a; Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Shared digital governance platforms could also help overcome ministerial silos (Khullar & Ray, 2026).

Sixth, increase funding. Raising public spending on ECCE to about Rs 32,500 per Anganwadi child and Rs 46,000 per kindergarten child per year, and earmarking around 1.5-2.2% of GDP for ECCE, is crucial for meeting the 2030 goal (Kundu et al., 2022; Bal, 2025). Union and state governments should commit to higher and better targeted spending on recruiting, training, and keeping committed pre-primary teachers (Mondal & Mondal, 2025). Supporting multilingual practices that give space to children's home languages is also important to ensure that access to ECCE is both fair and meaningful (Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

Seventh, strengthen community engagement and parental awareness. Wide reaching media campaigns, communitybased outreach, and programmes focused on awareness can help parents value ECCE and adopt supportive practices at home. These might include sessions on caregiving, feeding, nutrition, play, and age-appropriate home learning (Rao et al., 2021a; Malik & Hasan, 2024; Mondal & Mondal, 2025).

8. LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it relies on secondary sources rather than original primary data from Anganwadi centres, schools, teachers, or families. Second, state-disaggregated quantitative data were not uniformly accessible for all states, limiting the granularity of cross-state comparisons. Third, state-specific scholarly literature remains uneven, with detailed accounts available for some states, notably Singh and Roy (2025) on Bihar, but limited or absent for others. Fourth, because NEP 2020 implementation is an ongoing and rapidly evolving process, with Aadharshila introduced in 2024 and MWCD co-location guidelines introduced in 2025, some conditions described in the literature may already be evolving by the time of publication.

9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research should prioritise primary, field-based studies of ECCE implementation across a representative sample of districts in multiple states, encompassing rural and urban Anganwadi centres, co-located and standalone models, and government and private pre-primary provision. Specifically, research should examine the extent of Aadharshila curriculum adoption and fidelity of implementation; the proportion of Anganwadi workers who have completed NEP-aligned training and their perceived effectiveness; the functioning of joint Department of Education-Department of Social Welfare coordination mechanisms at district and block levels; and child-level school readiness outcomes as children transition from the Foundational Stage to Grade 3. Longitudinal studies tracking cohorts of children across different states would be particularly valuable. Mondal and Mondal (2025) call for longitudinal, cross-sectional, and impactful studies as part of the multi-pronged strategies needed, a recommendation this study fully endorses. Comparative studies examining how leading states have addressed governance convergence and teacher redeployment, and how these lessons transfer to states with larger implementation gaps, could yield valuable insights. Future research should also explore digital tools' potential to support Anganwadi workers and foster professional learning communities (Khullar & Ray, 2026).

10. CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 articulates a transformative vision for Early Childhood Care and Education in India, repositioning the early years as the foundation of a redesigned 5+3+3+4 schooling structure and committing the country to universal, quality ECCE provision by 2030. This aligns with SDG 4.2. As Mondal and Mondal (2025) conclude in their reality check, "the ambitious policy goal of achieving universal-holistic-high-quality ECCE in the context of SDG 4.2 can be achieved through the proper and thoughtful multi-pronged strategies and plan of action along with vibrant political will." This study endorses that conclusion, while demonstrating that its realisation requires simultaneous progress across multiple dimensions: access and infrastructure, curriculum and pedagogy, workforce professionalisation, inter-ministerial governance, data integration, equity, and funding. The post-NEP period has seen significant national initiatives such as NCFFS 2022, NIPUN Bharat 2021, Aadharshila and Navchetana 2024, and ITEP 2023 that collectively represent unprecedented curricular and institutional activity. Yet significant gaps remain between policy architecture and observable practice, gaps that are particularly pronounced in populous, predominantly rural states such as Bihar but that manifest to varying degrees across the country. Contextualised innovations such as the teacher-training model documented by Singh and Roy (2025) in Bihar demonstrate that locally adapted, theory-informed approaches can begin to bridge this gap. Ultimately, realising NEP 2020's transformative ECCE potential across India's diverse states requires not only sound policy design but also sustained political commitment, adequate and equitably sequenced resource allocation, genuine inter-ministerial convergence, and continued attention to the specific linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts of India's children and communities.

DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

The authors conceived the study, conducted the document analysis and literature review, and wrote the manuscript in its entirety.

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Grammarly was used for language structuring and drafting support during manuscript preparation. All content was reviewed, verified against cited sources, and edited by the authors.

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Availability of Data and Materials

This study is based entirely on publicly available policy documents, institutional reports, and published literature. No new datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval, as it is based solely on the analysis of publicly available documents and published literature..

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