



National education vision of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad: a qualitative study in the context of Nep 2020 and SDG-4

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Abstract

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad considered education the cornerstone of national regeneration and democratic maturity. As independent India's first Minister of Education, he articulated a vision that harmonised scientific rationality, humanistic values, cultural pluralism, and social justice. This qualitative study reinterprets Azad's educational thought through an analysis of his major writings, parliamentary speeches, and early post-independence policy initiatives. The discussion situates his ideas within contemporary frameworks, particularly the National Education Policy 2020 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable education. Findings reveal that Azad anticipated many modern educational priorities universal access, women's empowerment, multidisciplinary learning, mother-tongue instruction, and the integration of technology with ethical values. The study concludes that revisiting Azad's framework can help shape a more inclusive and culturally rooted education system for 21st-century India.

Keywords: Maulana abul kalam azad, educational thought, nep 2020, sdg-4, humanism, indian education system

Introduction

Education has always played a central role in shaping the ideals, aspirations, and social character of a nation. For Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), education was not only a tool of personal enlightenment but also a national duty essential for building a democratic and morally responsible society. As the first Minister of Education in independent India, Azad worked toward establishing an education system that would blend India's cultural heritage with the dynamism of modern scientific knowledge. He believed that a nation could sustain democratic institutions only when its citizens possessed critical thinking, ethical values, and an inclusive outlook. In the 21st century, India's National Education Policy 2020 and the global development agenda defined by SDG-4 echo many of Azad's core educational principles holistic learning, equity, multilingualism, universal access, and lifelong learning. Therefore, examining Azad's educational thought in the present context becomes necessary not only for historical understanding but also for enriching contemporary educational reform. Although substantial scholarship exists on Azad's contributions to national education, limited research systematically aligns his thought with NEP 2020 and SDG-4. This study addresses that gap by offering a contemporary qualitative analysis of Azad's vision.

Review of Related Literature

1. Historical and Biographical Scholarship

Works by Kabir (1988) [17], Chopra (1989) [7], and Bakshi (1991) [3] document Azad's life as a freedom fighter and intellectual who shaped India's early educational planning. Douglas (1993) [11] and Minault & Troll (1988) [22] explore Azad's synthesis of Islamic scholarship, rationalism, and secular nationalism.

2. Philosophical and Comparative Studies

Scholars such as Bedar (1968) [4] and Habib (2010) [16] examine Azad's interpretation of *ilm* (knowledge) as a universal, ethical, and emancipatory force. Comparisons

with Dewey (1938) [10] and Freire (1970) [12] reveal meaningful parallels, especially regarding experiential learning, democratic participation, and education for liberation.

3. Contemporary Research on Indian Education

Recent studies (Mishra, 2022; Ghosh, 2023; Kapur, 2021) [13, 18, 23] focus on digital inclusion, rural education, and the post-pandemic learning landscape. These studies underscore a renewed need for human-centered and ethical educational models concerns that Azad articulated long before the present era.

Research Gap

Despite a growing body of literature on Azad's thought, few studies critically connect his philosophy with current educational reforms such as NEP 2020 and SDG-4. The present study contributes to this understudied area by offering an interpretive, policy-oriented analysis.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the philosophical foundations of Maulana Azad's national education vision.
2. To examine Azad's policy initiatives and institutional contributions between 1947 and 1958.
3. To interpret the relevance of Azad's educational framework for NEP 2020 and SDG-4.

Research Questions

1. What principles constitute Azad's vision of national education?
2. How did his educational leadership influence early post-independence India?
3. How do Azad's ideas align with contemporary global and national educational frameworks?

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, historical-interpretive approach to examine Azad's educational ideas through

philosophical and documentary analysis. Primary materials such as *India Wins Freedom*, *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, parliamentary debates, and early education policy documents along with secondary literature including books, peer-reviewed articles, and academic studies, form the core data set. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) [6] thematic content analysis, all texts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to universal education, humanistic values, multilingualism, scientific temper, and cultural pluralism, ensuring conceptual clarity and coherence across the sources.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's speeches, writings, and policy interventions reveals a deep, multidimensional educational philosophy that remains relevant in the contemporary Indian and global educational landscape. The major findings are discussed below under thematic headings derived from the interpretive coding process.

1. Democratization of Education

Azad firmly believed that the strength of a democracy lies in the education of its citizens. His repeated emphasis on universal access to schooling reflects an understanding of education as a tool of empowerment, not privilege. During the early years of independent India, when illiteracy was widespread, Azad envisioned a comprehensive plan for free and compulsory education for all children. His calls for state responsibility in guaranteeing access anticipated the constitutional commitments that India later formalized through the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009. Azad's fivefold educational programme basic, adult, secondary, technical, and cultural education demonstrated a holistic, lifecycle-oriented understanding of learning. He recognized that education must address every age group and must not be restricted to children alone. This approach resonates with SDG-4.6 on adult literacy and SDG-4.3 on lifelong learning opportunities. His insistence on bridging socioeconomic disparities through government-funded education also reflects contemporary concerns regarding equity, digital inclusion, and rural–urban divides.

2. Women's Education and Social Empowerment

One of Azad's most progressive stances was his unwavering advocacy for women's education at a time when female literacy levels were extremely low in India. He believed that national development is impossible without uplifting women, who he argued form the intellectual and moral backbone of society. His vision extended beyond basic education; he encouraged women to engage in higher education, leadership roles, and professional fields. This aligns with present-day gender empowerment frameworks outlined in NEP 2020, which calls for gender-inclusion funds, safe learning environments, and leadership-building programmes for girls. SDG-4.5 further emphasizes eliminating gender disparities, making Azad's ideas remarkably ahead of his time. His stance also anticipates contemporary feminist educational theories that stress equal opportunity, agency, and socio-cultural transformation.

3. Balancing Scientific Temper with Moral and Aesthetic Development

Azad occupies a unique place in educational history for his effort to harmonize scientific rationality with moral,

cultural, and aesthetic development. His support for the establishment of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the University Education Commission (1948–49), and national academies such as the Sahitya Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, and Sangeet Natak Akademi demonstrates his belief that science and culture are complementary. He argued that scientific knowledge must be tempered by ethics and humanism so that technological progress does not alienate individuals from society or weaken cultural identity. This vision finds a strong echo in NEP 2020's push for multidisciplinary learning, where STEM fields are integrated with humanities, social sciences, and the arts. It also aligns with SDG-4.7, which emphasizes education for sustainable development, human rights, peace, and global citizenship.

4. Language Policy and Cultural Pluralism

Azad's multilingual language policy was rooted in India's diversity. He advocated that early schooling should take place in the mother tongue because children learn foundational concepts more effectively in their first language. At the same time, he recognized the importance of English for higher education and global engagement. His balanced approach mirrors NEP 2020's three-language formula and its strong emphasis on mother-tongue instruction in foundational stages. In a contemporary context where debates around language are often politically charged, Azad's position remains a powerful model for inclusive linguistic policy. His vision also aligns with UNESCO's recommendations on culturally responsive education and SDG-4's emphasis on multilingualism and cultural preservation.

5. Secularism, Citizenship, and National Integration

Azad's concept of secularism was deeply educational. He saw schools as spaces where children from different communities could learn together, develop mutual trust, and build a shared national identity. He warned against communalized curricula and argued for textbooks that present Indian history and culture impartially. For him, education was a critical instrument for building emotional unity and preventing social fragmentation.

This perspective is profoundly relevant today, when polarization threatens social harmony in many parts of the world. Azad's emphasis on secular ethics, citizenship values, and interfaith understanding connects directly with SDG-4.7, which highlights education for peace, tolerance, and global citizenship. NEP 2020's focus on ethics, constitutional values, and character development also resonates with Azad's ideals.

6. Relevance to NEP 2020 and SDG-4

A notable finding of this study is that Azad's educational philosophy anticipated numerous principles now embedded in NEP 2020 and SDG-4. For instance

- **Holistic and multidisciplinary learning:** Azad's efforts to integrate science, humanities, and arts align closely with NEP 2020.
- **Equity and inclusion:** His advocacy for universal access to education parallels SDG-4's targets of eliminating social and gender disparities.
- **Vocational and skill development:** Azad supported practical and technical education, an idea strongly reinforced in NEP 2020's emphasis on vocational courses from school level.

- **Teacher quality:** He consistently argued that teachers must possess moral integrity and intellectual commitment, echoing NEP's focus on continuous professional development.
- **Cultural rootedness and global outlook:** His reforms aimed at preserving Indian culture while encouraging global engagement an idea present in NEP 2020's conceptualization of global citizenship education.

Overall, the findings suggest that Azad's vision was profoundly modern, and that contemporary policy frameworks can still draw deeply from his ideas.

Educational Implications

The reinterpretation of Azad's educational thought offers multiple implications for present-day educational policy, practice, and institutional development in India.

1. Curriculum Development for Holistic Learning

Azad's insistence on integrating scientific knowledge with moral and aesthetic education highlights the need for curricula that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. Schools and universities must design programmes that foster

- critical thinking
- ethical reasoning
- artistic and cultural expression
- scientific inquiry
- environmental responsibility

This supports NEP 2020's shift from rote memorization to experiential, conceptual, and value-based learning. Incorporating Azad's framework would also strengthen SDG-4.7's call for education that promotes sustainable development, human rights, and global citizenship.

2. Strengthening Teacher Education and Professional Ethics

Azad consistently emphasized the moral and intellectual calibre of teachers as central to the success of any education system. Teacher education programmes must therefore

- include modules on reflective practice
- strengthen training in inclusive and multicultural pedagogy
- focus on socio-emotional competencies
- encourage research-based teaching practices
- reinforce professional ethics and citizenship values

This aligns with NEP 2020's emphasis on competency-based teacher training and continuous professional development. A teacher prepared under Azad's philosophy becomes a facilitator of holistic human development, not just a transmitter of information.

3. Ensuring Inclusive and Equitable Access

Drawing upon Azad's belief in education as a democratic right, modern educational institutions must ensure that marginalized groups receive equitable opportunities. This includes

- bridging the digital divide through ICT infrastructure
- creating multi-language learning resources
- community-based learning centers
- flexible learning pathways for rural and tribal students
- universal access for students with disabilities

Such policies directly support SDG-4's agenda of inclusivity and align with NEP 2020's proposals for equity-oriented interventions.

4. Gender-Responsive Educational Structures

Azad's progressive commitment to women's education requires institutions to adopt strategies such as

- gender-sensitive teaching practices
- safe and enabling learning environments
- scholarships and mentorship programmes for female students
- leadership opportunities for girls at school and college levels
- gender studies modules integrated into the curriculum

Promoting gender justice in education not only honors Azad's vision but also advances India's commitments under SDG-4.5 and NEP 2020's gender inclusion fund.

5. Promoting Community-Based and Civic Education

Azad viewed education as a collective national endeavor. He believed that schools should function as community hubs that promote civic values, public awareness, and cultural participation. Educational institutions can adopt

- service-learning projects
- community literacy programmes
- local culture documentation projects
- environmental stewardship activities
- interfaith and intercultural dialogue sessions

Such practices strengthen social cohesion and help learners understand their communal and civic responsibilities.

6. Culturally Sensitive Integration of Technology

While Azad lived in a pre-digital age, his philosophy particularly the balance between modernity and cultural rootedness offers guidance for integrating technology in culturally sensitive ways. This includes

- using regional languages in digital platforms
- creating culturally relevant e-content
- training teachers in ethical and purposeful use of technology
- ensuring ICT access in marginalized areas

This approach reduces the risk of cultural homogenization and supports SDG-4's goal of digital equity.

Conclusion

At last it can be said that Maulana Abul Kalam Azad stands as one of the foremost architects of modern Indian education, whose vision continues to offer profound insights for contemporary educational reform. His philosophy rested on the conviction that education must cultivate both the intellect and the moral character of individuals, thereby empowering citizens to contribute meaningfully to national development and global peace. His advocacy for universal access, women's empowerment, linguistic inclusivity, scientific temper, and cultural pluralism demonstrates a remarkably holistic and forward-looking understanding of education. The present study reveals that Azad's ideas are not only historically significant but also deeply relevant in the context of NEP 2020 and SDG-4. Many of the principles that guide current educational transformations such as multidisciplinary learning, experiential pedagogy, teacher professionalism, ethical citizenship, and inclusive access were articulated by Azad over seven decades ago. His insistence on balancing modern scientific education with cultural and moral refinement offers a timely reminder that

technological advancement must always be guided by humanistic values. In an age marked by digital divides, social fragmentation, and increasing pressures of globalization, Azad's emphasis on secularism, harmony, and ethical responsibility becomes particularly crucial. His vision challenges educators and policymakers to create institutions that nurture compassionate, critically aware, and socially engaged human beings rather than merely trained workers. Thus, revisiting Azad's educational philosophy is not an exercise in nostalgia but a practical necessity. His insights can guide a more equitable and culturally rooted transformation of India's educational system—one that values both diversity and unity, both innovation and tradition, and both national identity and global citizenship. The path toward educational justice and societal harmony, as Azad envisioned, requires moral integrity, visionary leadership, and sustained collective commitment.

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