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Bridging the Gap: An Analysis of Environmental Awareness and Life Skills in NEP 2020 from Policy to Practice

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Abstract: ***The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative shift in Indian education, placing significant emphasis on integrating environmental awareness and life skills as core components of holistic student development. This study examines the policy's ambitious framework for fostering responsible citizenship and sustainability through a multidisciplinary approach. It investigates the current landscape of implementation, focusing on stakeholder awareness, perceived challenges, and opportunities. The research employs a multi-faceted analytical framework to assess four interconnected pillars: stakeholder awareness and understanding, implementation status, practical challenges and opportunities, and stakeholder perceptions. Findings indicate that while NEP 2020 provides a robust vision for embedding environmental and life skills education, its operationalisation faces significant hurdles, including a lack of distinct curricular guidelines, uneven resource allocation, and a critical need for comprehensive teacher training. The study concludes that bridging the gap between policy intent and practical application is essential. This requires targeted strategies for curriculum development, robust professional development for educators, and equitable distribution of resources to ensure the successful cultivation of a generation equipped with the ecological consciousness and practical competencies necessary for the 21st century.***

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Environmental Awareness, Life Skills, Holistic Education & Implementation Challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a pivotal advancement by incorporating environmental awareness and life skills into the foundational educational framework, underscoring their essential role in comprehensive student development. This enhanced emphasis is designed to foster responsible citizenship and promote sustainable living practices from an early stage, enabling learners to understand ecological challenges and acquire practical competencies for effective problem-solving in the real world. By integrating environmental education with life skills such as critical thinking, communication, and emotional resilience, NEP 2020 aims to equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with social and environmental acumen, thereby cultivating a generation capable of making constructive contributions to society and addressing global sustainability objectives.

The NEP-2020 emphasises the integration of environmental mindfulness and sustainable development principles across curricula, aligning with the United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development (Tripathi et al., 2023). This policy highlights the need to reconfigure the entire education system to cultivate both foundational and higher-order cognitive capacities, alongside social, ethical, and emotional dispositions, which are essential for achieving the critical targets of the 2030 Agenda (Shephard, 2023). A core tenet of this educational reform is to foster "green skills", which are essential for mitigating environmental degradation and promoting sustainable economic practices (Mahapatra & Ravichandran, 2023). This approach recognises that environmental education, often termed green education, is fundamental in equipping future generations with the knowledge, skills, and values required to address complex ecological challenges and ensure the sustainability of life-sustaining forces on Earth (Kumar et al., 2023) (Kumar & Shobana, 2024). This reorientation prioritises a shift from rote learning to a more holistic, multidisciplinary educational framework that integrates arts, sports, vocational skills, and environmental studies to foster comprehensive student development (Swargiary, 2023). The NEP-2020 also represents a significant departure from previous educational policies, such as the 1986 policy, by promoting flexibility in curriculum design and a unified vision of education that spans across various disciplines (Saluja, 2024; BHAKAT, 2025).

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This renewed focus on comprehensive development aims to cultivate critical 21st-century skills, including communication, creativity, and problem-solving, moving beyond mere memorisation toward conceptual understanding (Bhakat, 2025). This paradigm shift is crucial for fostering an education system that not only imparts academic knowledge but also nurtures emotional, social, ethical, and cognitive growth in learners, aligning India's rich heritage with contemporary global educational practices (BHAKAT, 2025). The NEP-2020 focuses on transforming the Indian education system by promoting holistic and multidisciplinary learning, aiming to create an equitable, inclusive, and learner-centric environment from early childhood through higher education (BHAKAT, 2025; Sharma, 2025).

A. Components Of Environmental Awareness And Life Skills

Environmental Awareness and Life Skills are essential components of holistic education, as emphasised in the National Education Policy 2020.

Figure 1: Foundations of Environmental Education

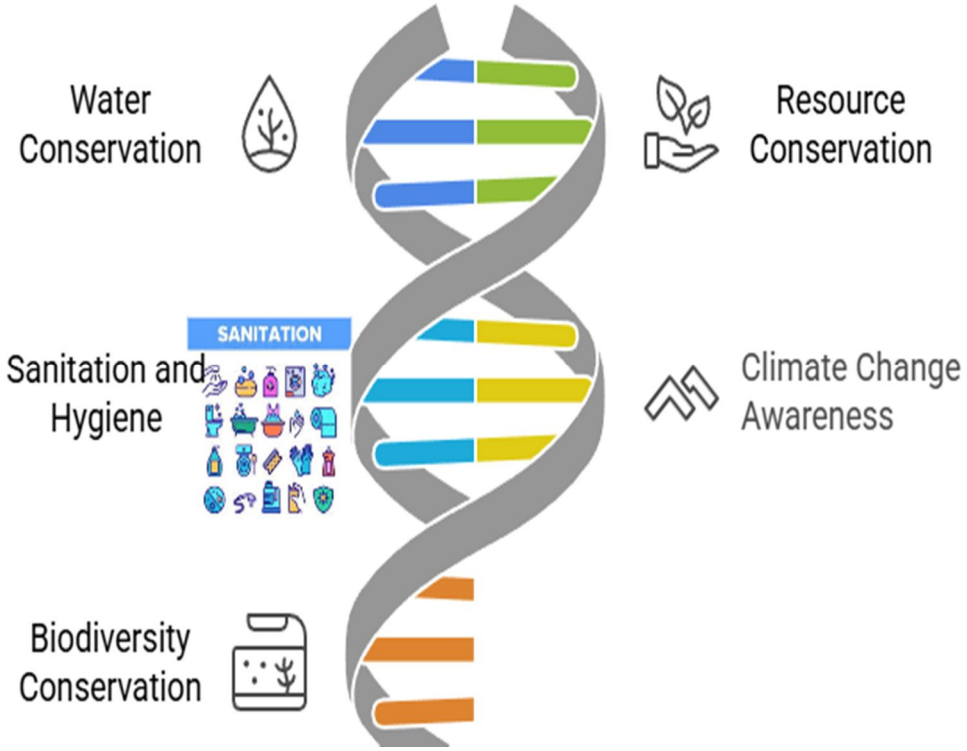

Figure 1 above utilises a robust structure, employing the DNA double helix as a central metaphor to illustrate that the principles of sustainability are as fundamental and interconnected as the very code of life. Each colored strand represents a vital component of environmental responsibility, weaving together to form the core of a resilient and balanced ecosystem.

B. The helix elegantly connects five critical themes

- On one side, Water Conservation, Sanitation and Hygiene, and Biodiversity Conservation are shown as the bedrock of community well-being and a healthy planet. They ensure clean water, public health, and the stability of ecosystems.
- On the opposing side, Resource Conservation and Climate Change Awareness highlight the need for mindful consumption and a global understanding of our environmental impact.

Just as genes work in concert to shape an organism, the image suggests that these elements cannot function independently of one another. They are intrinsically linked, forming the essential genetic blueprint for a sustainable future, where the health of the environment and human society are the same.

Figure 2: Life Skills Development

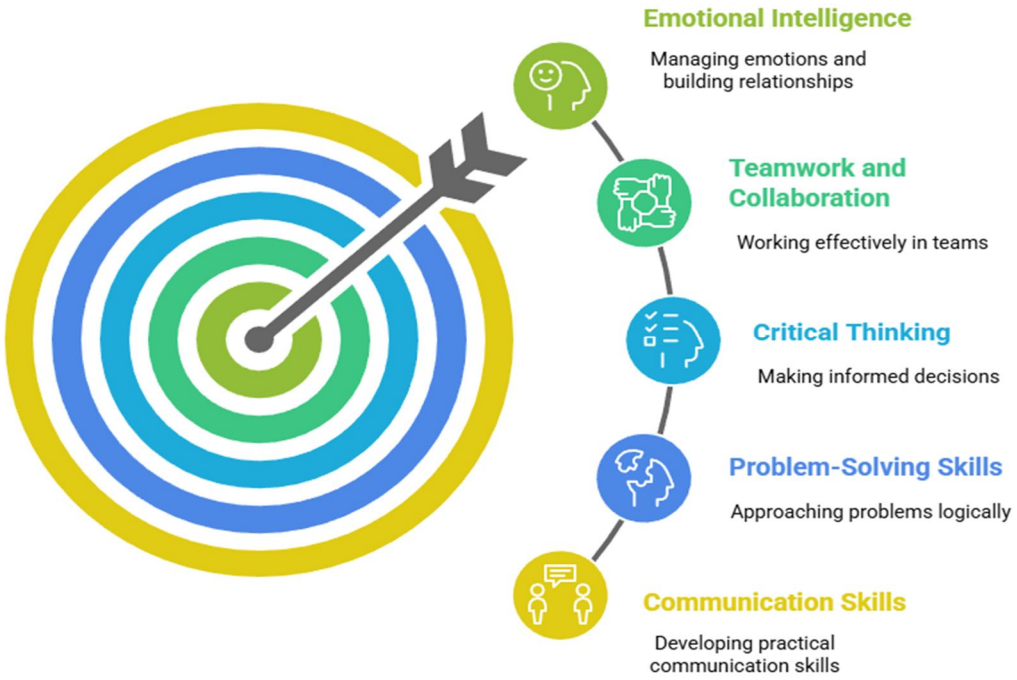

Figure 2 above employs the powerful metaphor of a bullseye target struck by an arrow to represent the achievement of goals. It illustrates that such success is not accidental but is built upon a foundation of essential, interconnected skills. Each competency is distinctly represented by its own icon and colour, underscoring its unique role in a cohesive journey of personal and professional development.

C. The skills are arranged in a purposeful sequence, suggesting a developmental pathway

- Communication Skills form the critical base, enabling the clear expression of ideas and effective connection with others.
- Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking follow, providing the analytical framework to navigate challenges and make sound decisions.
- Teamwork and Collaboration emphasise the vital ability to synergise with others to achieve common objectives.
- At the apex, Emotional Intelligence crowns the structure, representing the mastery of self-awareness and interpersonal dynamics that underpin leadership and healthy relationships.

Collectively, these competencies are depicted as the indispensable tools that equip an individual to aim and consistently "hit the target" of their aspirations, driving growth and effectiveness in every sphere of life.

II. NEP-2020 ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND LIFE SKILLS: IMPORTANCE

The policy aims to instil in students a deeper understanding of environmental issues and cultivate life skills essential for navigating a rapidly changing world, moving beyond traditional academic silos to integrate practical knowledge and real-world applicability (Sachdeva & Latesh, 2023). This comprehensive approach seeks to develop well-rounded individuals equipped with the competencies necessary for sustainable living and active participation in a global society (Muralidharan et al., 2022). This focus on experiential learning, integrated with subjects like arts, humanities, and sports, aims to cultivate ethical, rational, and compassionate individuals capable of critical thinking and innovation (Kaurav et al., 2021) (Mangamma, 2025). This comprehensive approach promotes not only academic excellence but also emphasises skills essential for employment, recognising the importance of communication, IT proficiency, and foreign language acquisition in an increasingly globalised world (Kumar, 2021). The NEP-2020 places primary importance on the development of creative potential, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities, aligning with global educational standards while grounding learning in Indian values (Ashokkumar et al., 2024). This transformative policy aims to prepare students for the demands of the 21st century by fostering a deep understanding of environmental sustainability and equipping them with essential life skills (Jaya et al., 2025; Sachdeva & Latesh, 2023).

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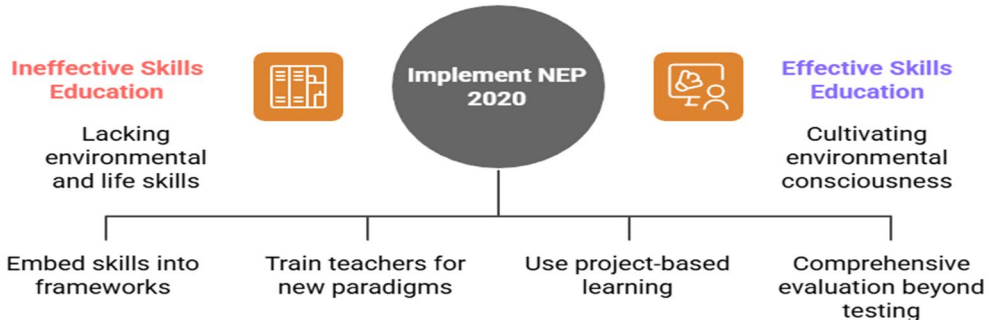
To achieve these objectives, the policy advocates for significant reforms across all educational structures, including governance and regulation, aiming to create a system that nurtures both foundational literacy and numeracy, as well as higher-order cognitive capabilities (Delhi & Kumar, 2023). The NEP 2020 promotes a flexible and multidisciplinary educational framework that recognises and fosters the unique capabilities of each student, ensuring no challenging separations between academic and vocational streams (Delhi & Kumar, 2023). This framework aims to foster holistic development by encouraging inquiry-based and experiential learning, thereby preparing students to address complex challenges effectively (Sachdeva & Latesh, 2023). The policy mandates the integration of essential subjects and skills, such as scientific temper, creativity, communication, and digital literacy, to ensure a comprehensive educational experience (Delhi & Kumar, 2023).

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the specific mechanisms by which NEP 2020 aims to operationalise these environmental and life skills education mandates within existing pedagogical and curricular frameworks, examining both the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications for educators and learners. It further examines the preparedness of educational institutions and the professional development needs of teachers to implement these transformative changes effectively.

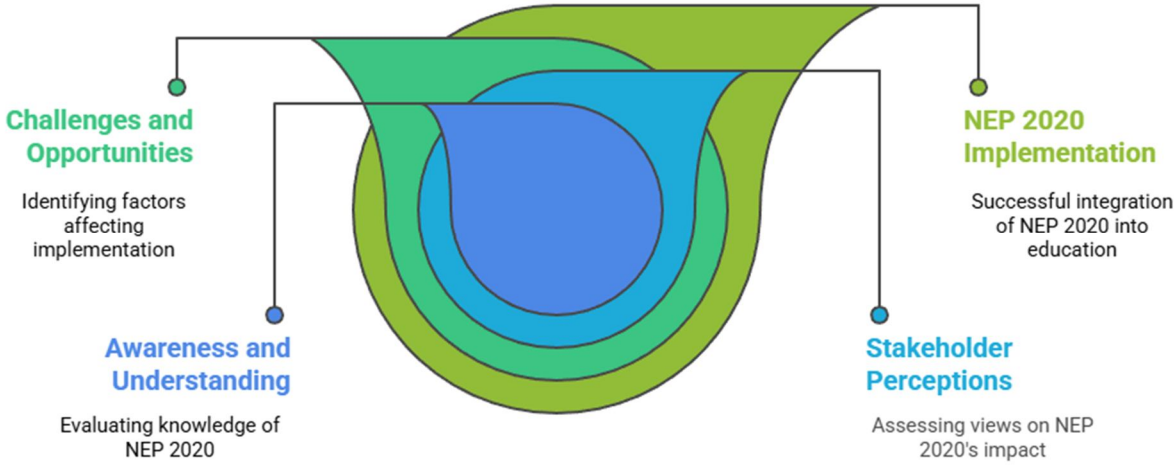
Figure 3: Implement NEP-2020



The research aims to identify potential challenges and opportunities in integrating these new educational paradigms, particularly in diverse socioeconomic and geographical contexts across India. This investigation will also assess the efficacy of proposed assessment strategies in measuring the acquisition of these skills, moving beyond conventional standardised testing towards more authentic and comprehensive evaluation methods. Specifically, this study will analyse the development and integration of novel pedagogical approaches, such as project-based learning and community engagement, designed to cultivate environmental consciousness and practical life skills among students.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research objectives for studying NEP 2020 are organised into four key pillars, as shown in Figure 4:



- *Awareness & Understanding:* Measures how well students, educators, and administrators know the policy's details.
- *Challenges & Opportunities:* Diagnoses the real-world hurdles and potential catalysts for effective implementation.
- *Implementation Status:* Tracks the actual execution and integration of NEP's mandates into the education system.
- *Stakeholder Perceptions:* Captures the beliefs and attitudes of the people involved, which ultimately shape the policy's reception.

The figure's central design illustrates that these pillars are interdependent. For instance, Awareness influences Perceptions, which in turn affect the identification of Challenges and the success of Implementation. Together, they create a holistic feedback loop for evaluation.

V. DISCUSSION

The implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's provisions for environmental awareness and life skills represents a critical juncture in Indian education. This study identifies a significant consensus among stakeholders on the theoretical importance of these components for fostering holistic development and sustainable citizenship. The policy's vision to move beyond rote learning and create an integrated, experiential, and multidisciplinary framework is widely acknowledged as a necessary evolution to meet the challenges of the 21st century. However, the discussion reveals a substantial gap between this policy vision and the current level of readiness on the ground. The primary challenge lies in transitioning from a sporadic, compartmentalised approach to a systematic and unified one. As the pre-NEP landscape was characterised by inconsistency, the current phase is fraught with implementation hurdles. A central finding is the lack of distinct and coordinated curricular guidelines. Without clear, practical roadmaps, schools and teachers are left to interpret the policy's broad mandates, which can lead to potential fragmentation and uneven educational quality across India's diverse socioeconomic and geographic contexts.

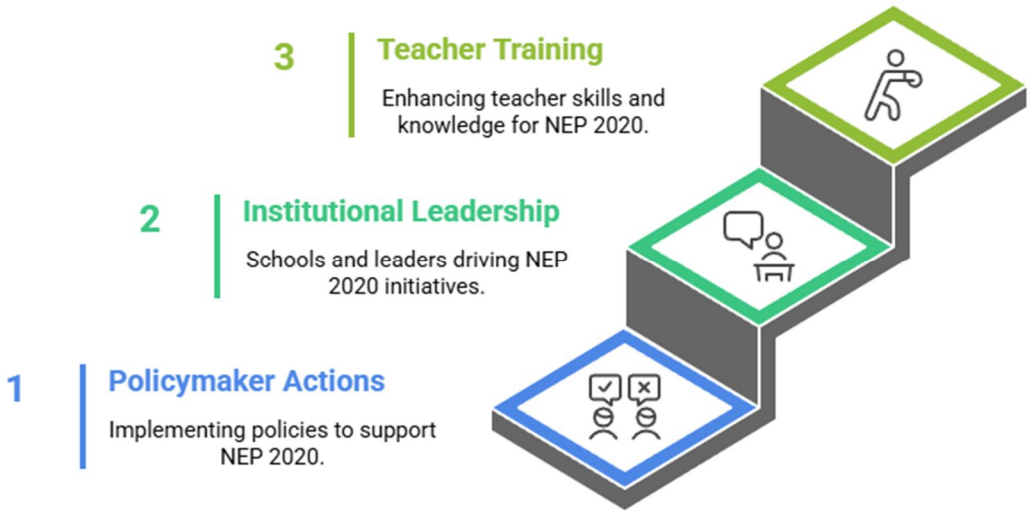
Furthermore, the success of this pedagogical shift is inextricably linked to teacher capacity. The current professional development ecosystem appears insufficient to equip educators with the novel methodologies, such as project-based learning, community engagement, and interdisciplinary instruction, required to deliver practical environmental and life skills education. This is compounded by disparities in resource availability and infrastructure, particularly between urban and rural institutions, which risk exacerbating existing educational inequalities. The digital divide further threatens to undermine the policy's inclusive ambitions.

Finally, while stakeholder awareness of NEP 2020 is growing, the depth of understanding regarding its specific provisions for environmental and life skills varies significantly. This variation influences perceptions and, consequently, the willingness and ability to embrace change. The interdependence of awareness, perceptions, challenges, and implementation status, as illustrated in the study's framework, creates a complex feedback loop that can either accelerate or hinder progress.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following suggestions are proposed to bridge the identified gaps and ensure the practical realisation of NEP 2020's goals:

Figure 5: Achieving NEP 2020 Goals



For policymakers and educational administrators, the effective implementation of NEP 2020's vision requires strategic, system-level interventions. This begins with the development of clear, actionable curriculum frameworks that provide grade-specific handbooks and model lesson plans to guide the integration of environmental and life skills education across subjects, emphasising local relevance and activity-based learning. To ensure equity, a phased and differentiated roll-out is essential, acknowledging the diverse starting points of various states and institutions by providing tailored timelines and enhanced support for under-resourced regions. Concurrently, it is critical to standardise and fund comprehensive, ongoing teacher professional development focused on experiential pedagogy, content knowledge, and strategies for fostering critical competencies. Finally, these efforts must be underpinned by targeted funding for essential infrastructure, such as science labs and digital classrooms, with priority given to rural and government schools.

At the institutional level, school leaders must champion this transformation by fostering a whole-school eco-culture that institutionalises sustainability through student-led clubs, waste management, and green campuses, creating an immersive learning environment. Building strong community partnerships with local NGOs, experts, and industries can provide students with invaluable real-world experiences and exposure to green careers. Furthermore, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers to jointly plan and execute projects is key to breaking down academic silos. To sustain this momentum, teacher education itself must be revamped to embed environmental and life skills pedagogy into pre-service programs. In-service teachers should be supported through peer-learning networks and professional learning communities that foster collaborative problem-solving and the sharing of best practices.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the National Education Policy 2020 marks a definitive and necessary paradigm shift in Indian education, aiming to equip students for the complex challenges of the 21st century by integrating environmental awareness and life skills into the core of the learning experience. Its vision of moving beyond traditional academic silos to foster holistic, multidisciplinary, and experiential learning is both ambitious and commendable. By aligning with global sustainability goals and emphasising competencies such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and ecological stewardship, the policy provides a robust framework for cultivating responsible, well-rounded citizens who are capable of contributing meaningfully to a sustainable future.

However, the ultimate success of this transformative vision hinges on effectively bridging the significant gap between policy intent and practical implementation. The journey from a theoretical framework to tangible classroom outcomes is fraught with challenges, including a lack of precise curricular guidelines, insufficient teacher preparedness, and stark infrastructural and resource disparities, particularly in rural areas. Overcoming these hurdles requires a concerted, collaborative effort from policymakers, educational institutions, and communities. Strategic investment in targeted teacher training, the development of clear and actionable learning resources, and a commitment to equitable resource allocation are essential to ensure that the promise of NEP 2020 becomes a reality for every learner across the nation.

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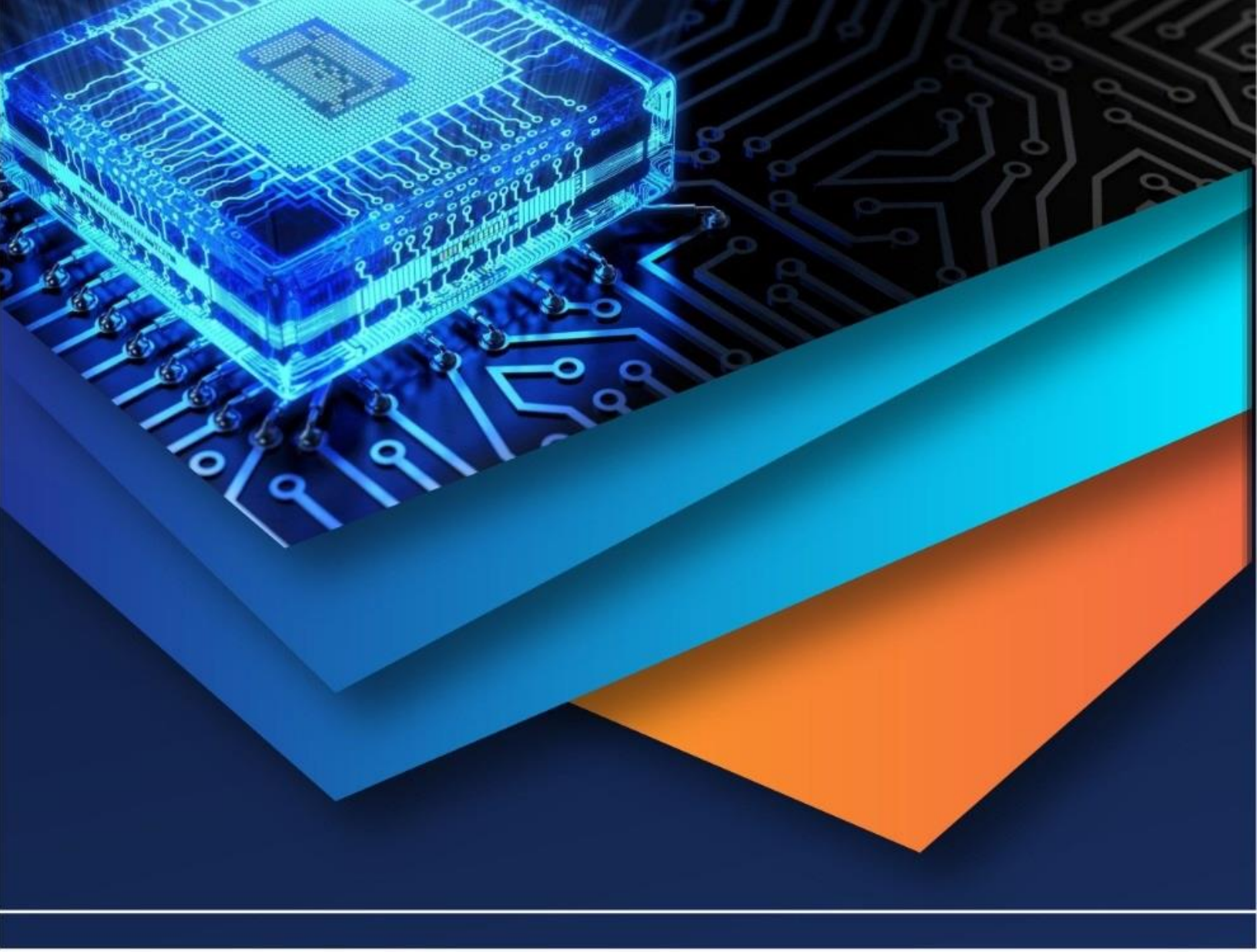

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