Inclusive and Equitable Education in NEP 2020: A Study of Scheduled Castes and Marginalized Communities

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Abstract: Implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India would bring about a significant change in the country's educational landscape, with a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion. The purpose of this study is to provide a critical analysis of the notion of inclusive and equitable education as it is envisioned in the National Education Policy 2020, specifically with regard to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and other marginalised populations. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how the National Education statutory 2020 (NEP 2020) tackles long-standing educational gaps and systematic exclusions. This evaluation utilises statutory provisions, institutional processes, and recommended reforms. Through targeted scholarships, gender inclusion funds, special education zones, and curriculum revisions, the research underlines the policy's focus on providing access, retention, and quality education for disadvantaged populations. This is accomplished through the establishment of special education zones. Nevertheless, it also investigates the difficulties associated with implementation, such as the constraints of the infrastructure, the shortcomings of the monitoring procedures, and the societal biases that exist. While the National Environmental Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) does provide a progressive framework, the paper contends that its success will be contingent on continued political will, community involvement, and accountability mechanisms. The study draws from both policy papers and secondary research while making its argument. At the end of the study, recommendations are provided to improve the policy's efficacy in fostering social justice and educational empowerment for SCs and other marginalized populations.

Keywords: Equitable Education • NEP • Scheduled Castes

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a powerful instrument for fostering social change. In a country like India—marked by entrenched social hierarchies and historical injustices—education holds the transformative potential to break the cycle of poverty, marginalization, and exclusion. This potential is particularly significant for disadvantaged groups such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), who have historically faced systemic oppression and discrimination. Despite constitutional safeguards and numerous policy interventions over several decades, substantial disparities persist in terms of access, quality, and outcomes of education for these marginalized communities (Deshpande 2011; Nambissan 2009). The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents a comprehensive effort to reimagine India's education system for the 21st century. One of its foundational pillars is the vision of inclusive and equitable education—a commitment to ensure that every child, irrespective of socio-economic background, has access to meaningful and high-quality learning opportunities (Government of India 2020). NEP 2020 explicitly acknowledges the unique educational challenges faced by historically marginalized communities, including SCs,

Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), girls, children with disabilities, and others. Through its learner-centered, interdisciplinary, and flexible approach, NEP 2020 aims to dismantle structural barriers and create a more just and inclusive learning environment. For the Scheduled Castes, in particular, inclusive education is not merely a developmental objective—it is an essential means of achieving social justice, empowerment, and human dignity. The policy outlines several mechanisms to address these disparities, including the establishment of Special Education Zones, the development of inclusive curricula, targeted financial support for gender inclusion, and enhanced foundational literacy and numeracy programs (Government of India, 2020). Furthermore, NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of community engagement, culturally responsive pedagogy, and mother tongue-based instruction. These elements are critical in ensuring that learners from culturally and socially marginalized backgrounds are not alienated from the educational process but are instead empowered by it (Kumar 2021). However, the success of NEP 2020 depends not only on its vision and design but also on its effective implementation. Numerous historical experiences in Indian education have shown that well-intentioned reforms often falter due to inadequate resources, limited institutional capacity, deep-seated social biases, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms (Jha & Parvati 2010). As such, there is a pressing need for a critical analysis of how NEP 2020 conceptualizes and enacts inclusive and equitable education, particularly for SCs and other structurally disadvantaged groups.

This article seeks to evaluate the extent to which NEP 2020 addresses educational disparities and fosters meaningful inclusion for Scheduled Castes and similar marginalized populations. It examines key provisions of the policy, the structural and pedagogical reforms it proposes, and the practical challenges associated with its implementation. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on education reform, equity, and social transformation in contemporary India.

Background and Rationale

Despite the existence of constitutional safeguards and a range of affirmative action policies, educational inequities in India persist as a deep-rooted and systemic issue. Among the most affected groups are the Scheduled Castes (SCs), who face multiple and intersecting layers of disadvantage stemming from historical caste-based discrimination, socio-economic deprivation, and institutional neglect. These challenges manifest in a variety of forms, including high dropout rates, poor infrastructure, caste-based discrimination within schools, and persistently low learning outcomes among SC children. The situation is particularly dire in rural and remote areas, where government-funded schools often lack basic facilities and struggle with shortages of qualified and motivated teachers. In this context, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) emerges as a potentially transformative intervention. Introduced at a time when India seeks to align its educational system with global benchmarks while addressing stark internal disparities, NEP 2020 emphasizes universal access, foundational literacy and numeracy, and the creation of inclusive curricula and pedagogical practices (Government of India 2020). The policy's explicit focus on historically marginalized groups—such as SCs, STs, OBCs, girls, and children with disabilities—marks a significant shift toward equity-driven reform. However, the implementation of such an ambitious policy must be critically examined, particularly in terms of its ability to address the specific educational needs of the Scheduled Castes. The urgency of this investigation is driven by the recognition that meaningful inclusion requires more than broad

policy declarations—it demands actionable strategies, sustained institutional commitment, and an awareness of the socio-cultural realities that shape educational access and achievement. This study seeks to evaluate the extent to which NEP 2020 effectively addresses these challenges and promotes equitable educational opportunities for SCs and other underrepresented communities.

Objectives of the Study

This paper seeks to:

1. Analyze the concept of inclusive and equitable education as articulated in NEP 2020.
2. Examine the specific provisions aimed at improving educational access and quality for Scheduled Castes and marginalized communities.
3. Evaluate the policy's potential impact on reducing educational inequality.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, complemented by a critical review of pertinent academic literature, government publications, and policy documents. The analysis focuses on key policy provisions related to inclusive and equitable education, with particular attention to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and other marginalized communities. Secondary data from credible sources—including Census reports, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) surveys, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), and government audit reports—were utilized to examine patterns of socio-educational disparity. Furthermore, the study integrates scholarly perspectives to assess the theoretical underpinnings, policy architecture, and implementation challenges associated with NEP 2020. This methodological approach facilitates a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the ways in which inclusive education is conceptualized, articulated, and enacted within the policy framework.

Results

Theoretical Foundations and Historical Context of Inclusive Education in India

Inclusive education is rooted in principles of human rights and social justice. It goes beyond simply placing marginalized students in mainstream classrooms. As Ainscow (1999) notes, true inclusion involves transforming educational cultures, policies, and practices to support diverse learners effectively. UNESCO (2009) reinforces this by defining inclusive education as a continuous process that increases participation and reduces exclusion within the education system. The concept draws heavily from Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of Critical Pedagogy, which views education as a tool for empowerment and resistance against oppression. Freire emphasizes the importance of recognizing marginalized voices and promoting critical reflection to foster societal change. These perspectives highlight education's dual role: nurturing academic growth while advancing dignity, equality, and agency—particularly vital for communities historically subjected to systemic exclusion, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India. Historically, the caste system has profoundly influenced access to education in India. Despite constitutional protections like Article 15 (non-discrimination) and Article 46 (promotion of SCs' educational interests), caste-based exclusion persists. Research by Thorat and Newman (2007) shows that SCs often face bias in classrooms, poor access to resources, and under-representation in higher education. Although the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14, its benefits have not fully reached SC communities. Reports from PROBE (2011) and NUEPA (2016) reveal ongoing disparities in infrastructure and learning outcomes. Data from NSSO (2017–

18) and ASER (2022) show SC children continue to experience lower enrollment, higher dropout rates, and weaker academic performance, especially in rural areas. Scholars like Deshpande (2011) and Jodhka (2012) attribute these issues to persistent socio-cultural barriers such as untouchability, segregation, teacher prejudice, and irrelevant curricula. Efforts to address educational inequality date back decades. The Kothari Commission (1964–1966) emphasized social justice in education, while the 1986 National Policy on Education (revised in 1992) proposed the "Common School System" to reduce disparities—though implementation was limited. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 builds on these ideas, offering a broader, more inclusive vision. It recognizes the challenges faced by Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and proposes measures like Special Education Zones, mother tongue instruction, and gender inclusion funding. However, critiques remain. Scholars such as Ramachandran (2021) argue that NEP 2020 lacks concrete implementation plans and accountability mechanisms. Concerns also persist about increasing privatization and digital inequality, which risk further marginalizing underserved groups.

Inclusive Education in NEP 2020

NEP 2020 frames inclusive education as central to achieving both social justice and educational equity. The policy asserts that "education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality," and envisions an education system where "no child loses any opportunity to learn and excel because of circumstances of birth or background" (Ministry of Education, 2020). Inclusive education is addressed in detail across school and higher education levels. Chapter 6, titled *Equitable and Inclusive Education: Learning for All*, outlines recommendations for school education, while Chapter 14, *Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education*, focuses on strategies for universities and colleges.

Target Groups as Per NEP 2020

NEP 2020 classifies target groups for inclusive education interventions as follows:

- Gender identities: Primarily girls and transgender individuals.
- Socio-cultural identities: Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and minority groups.
- Geographical identities: Students from villages, small towns, and aspirational districts.
- Disabilities: Including physical, intellectual, and various learning disabilities.
- Socio-economic status: Children from low-income households, migrant families, orphans, children in vulnerable circumstances, and urban poor populations.

Recommendations for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

NEP 2020 identifies SEDGs as a new social category encompassing dimensions of gender, culture, geography, disability, and socio-economic status. Recognising the disproportionate dropout rates among these groups, the policy proposes several measures including targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers to encourage school attendance, and the distribution of bicycles to facilitate transportation. These interventions have proven effective in past efforts to increase school enrolment and reduce marginalisation.

Discussion

Barriers to Inclusive Education

Despite the government's stated commitment to inclusive education, a significant gap persists between policy intentions and on-ground realities. Dash (2018) highlights key challenges such as the lack of teacher training for inclusive settings, inadequate curriculum adaptations, and insufficient support systems. Sarao (2016) further identifies systemic issues like the absence of well-equipped teacher

training institutions and a shortage of qualified educators to address diverse learning needs. Sharma (2022) finds that negative attitudes, inadequate resources, poor school preparedness, and rigid curricula are primary barriers to inclusion. Singh and Agarwal (2015) add that infrastructural deficits and ineffective pedagogical approaches hinder the realisation of inclusive education. The competency of teachers plays a pivotal role in the success of inclusive education. A study by Das, Kuyini, and Desai (2013) found that around 70% of regular school teachers in Delhi lacked any formal training in special education, and 87% had no access to support services. Similarly, Coşkun et al (2009) emphasised that teachers often struggle to design and implement appropriate teaching materials for students with special needs, further exacerbating exclusion in classrooms.

Research by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) suggests that educators generally express positive attitudes toward the principle of inclusion; however, they often perceive its practical implementation as challenging. The inclusion of students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties has consistently been identified as particularly demanding for teachers, often eliciting negative perceptions toward teaching in such environments (Cook 2001; Cook et al 2007). Simpson et al (2005) emphasise that these students often face chronic difficulties in regulating emotions, behaviour, and interpersonal relationships, which significantly hinder their classroom learning experiences. Studies examining general education teachers in Turkey revealed hesitations about including students with severe learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Teachers holding negative attitudes frequently view inclusion as a burden and advocate for separate educational provisions, arguing that inclusion may negatively affect typically developing peers (Zambelli & Bonni 2004; Rakap & Kaczmarek

2010). These findings highlight prevalent concerns among teachers about the feasibility and effectiveness of inclusive practices in mainstream settings. School administrators and principals also play a vital role in fostering an inclusive school culture. According to MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013), effective leadership involves clearly communicating expectations around inclusive practices to staff, thereby shaping the institutional climate. Nevertheless, the perception that stakeholders, including teachers, parents, peers, administrators, and policymakers—hold broadly negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities remains widespread, further hindering the realisation of inclusive education. Creating an inclusive educational environment necessitates physical modifications to existing school infrastructure. Unfortunately, most educational institutions lack basic accessibility features such as ramps, elevators, tactile signage, and adapted toilet facilities. This physical inaccessibility significantly limits the participation of children with disabilities and contradicts the fundamental premise of inclusion. The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is critical in contemporary education, particularly in inclusive classrooms. ICT tools and assistive technologies offer tremendous potential to enhance learning experiences for children with disabilities. Devices such as screen readers, speech-to-text applications, and interactive software can support diverse learning needs, making education more accessible and efficient. However, access to such technologies remains uneven, and many schools lack the resources or training necessary to utilise them effectively. It is therefore essential that stakeholders—including educators, administrators, and support staff—are equipped with the necessary competencies to integrate ICT meaningfully into inclusive teaching practices.

Policy Planning and Implementation Gaps

Despite policy advancements, significant gaps persist in both the planning and implementation of inclusive education strategies. Often, policy frameworks are inadequately designed, lacking measurable indicators to assess implementation progress. Moreover, enforcement mechanisms, particularly in private educational institutions, are weak or absent, leading to inconsistent application. Parveen and Qounsar (2018) argue that inclusive education continues to be hindered by insufficient policy enforcement, lack of accountability, and educational environments that are not conducive to inclusive practices. These deficiencies underscore the need for robust planning, comprehensive implementation strategies, and monitoring systems to ensure that inclusive education moves beyond policy rhetoric to practical realisation. The policies and legislative frame work of our country for the betterment of education and inclusion as reported by Begum (2017) include-Action plan for inclusive Education of children and youth with Disabilities (2005), centrally sponsored scheme of integrated scheme education for the disabled. (1974), District primary Education programme (1994),Bahrul Islam committee (1985), National Action Plan (2005), National curriculum Framework (2005), National education policy (1968), National policy for persons with Disabilities (2006), National policy on education (1986), National trust Act. (1999), Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), Programme of action MHRD (1990 & 1992), Project Integrated Education for Disabled. (1987), Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. (2001), Rashtriya Madhyamic Shiksha Abhiyan (2013) and The NEP 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020, is particularly significant as it promotes "barrier-free access to education for all children with disabilities." Despite such efforts, large disparities persist—especially at the secondary education level—

affecting socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) who have historically faced underrepresentation in formal education. These disparities are especially acute for female students within each SEDG. Groups most affected include Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities, children from rural or remote areas, children with disabilities, and those from migrant or low-income households. The steep decline in school enrolment from primary to secondary and higher education levels is particularly pronounced among girls within these communities.

Role of Teachers in Inclusive Education

There is an urgent need for more special educators within the school education system to support inclusive learning environments. These professionals are essential for teaching students with disabilities—including those with specific learning difficulties—especially at the middle and secondary levels. Subject teachers must possess not only expertise in their disciplines but also the ability to understand and meet the unique learning needs of children with disabilities. To address this, specialized training in inclusive education should be integrated either during pre-service teacher education or through in-service programs. These can be offered as certification courses—full-time, part-time, or through blended learning models—at universities and teacher training institutes. A stronger alignment between the curricula of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) and the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) is also recommended to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to both deliver subject content and support inclusive pedagogies (NEP 2020).

Persistent Socio-Economic Disparities in Education

Despite affirmative action policies and constitutional guarantees, Scheduled Castes (SCs) continue to face entrenched social and

economic exclusion. According to the 2011 Census of India, the literacy rate among SCs stands at 66.1%, significantly below the national average of 77.7%. This educational gap often translates into limited employment opportunities and long-term socio-economic disadvantages. The NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index (2021) reveals that 31.5% of SCs live below the poverty line, compared to 15.5% of the general population. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2021–22 further indicates that over 70% of SC workers are employed in the unorganised sector, in jobs such as sanitation, construction, and domestic work—occupations marked by low wages, insecurity, and lack of

dignity. Other indicators also reflect systemic inequity: only 56% of SC households have access to safe drinking water (compared to 70% of upper-caste households), according to NFHS-5 (2019–21). Additionally, the 2018 National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report shows that only 7.2% of SC households own more than one hectare of land, underscoring their limited control over productive assets. These intersecting disadvantages—educational, economic, and infrastructural—highlight the urgent need for targeted and effective policies that promote inclusive development and equal opportunity across caste, class, gender, and ability lines.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Indicators of Scheduled Castes vs General Population

Indicator	Scheduled Castes (SCs)	General Population	Source
Literacy Rate (%)	66.1%	77.7%	Census of India, 2011
Below Poverty Line (%)	31.5%	15.5%	NITI Aayog MPI Report, 2021
Employed in Unorganized Sector (%)	70%+	52%	Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2022
Access to Clean Drinking Water (%)	56%	70%	NFHS-5, 2020–21
Land Ownership > 1 hectare (%)	7.2%	20.1%	NSSO Report, 2018

Ineffective Implementation of Welfare Policies

India has introduced several targeted programs aimed at improving the socio-economic and educational status of Scheduled Castes (SCs). These include the Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan (SCSP), pre- and post-matric scholarships, special hostels, and constitutional provisions for educational and employment reservations. However, despite the existence of these progressive frameworks, a persistent implementation gap undermines their intended impact. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has reported repeated cases of mismanagement in SCSP funds across various states. For instance, between 2016 and 2020, the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar utilized only 50% or less of the SCSP funds allocated to them. In many cases, funds were either diverted to unrelated schemes or left unused, leaving key projects incomplete. Field reports and civil society investigations highlight

corruption and local-level misallocation, often forcing eligible beneficiaries to pay bribes for accessing services. These structural inefficiencies further deepen the vulnerabilities of Scheduled Castes, who are already marginalized. The digital divide compounds these barriers, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where many individuals lack the digital literacy and infrastructure required to apply for schemes online. Consequently, a significant portion of the SC population remains unaware of available government welfare programs. These administrative failures, combined with entrenched structural inequalities, continue to deprive Scheduled Castes of the social and economic upliftment envisioned by these policies.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a bold and comprehensive reform effort aimed

at transforming India's education system to meet 21st-century demands. At its core is a commitment to inclusive and equitable education, particularly for historically marginalized communities such as the Scheduled Castes. NEP 2020 explicitly recognizes the structural barriers that limit educational access for disadvantaged groups and places equity and social justice at the heart of its reform agenda. It proposes several forward-thinking measures, including the creation of Special Education Zones, the promotion of foundational literacy, support for local language instruction, and targeted gender and inclusion subsidies. However, the success of NEP 2020 will depend not just on its aspirational vision, but on the political will, administrative competence, and community engagement required for its effective implementation at the grassroots level. Historical experience with educational reforms in India has shown that policy intentions alone are insufficient unless backed by sustained funding, capacity building, systematic monitoring, and widespread awareness and sensitization efforts—particularly to confront caste-based biases in both schools and society. Major challenges still remain, including digital inequality, inadequate infrastructure, teacher prejudice, and socio-economic instability. Despite its inclusive rhetoric, a considerable gap persists between policy declarations and the lived realities of Scheduled Castes and other marginalized communities.

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