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New Education Policy and Inclusivity in the Indian Context

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Abstract: The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in the Indian education system, emphasising inclusivity, accessibility, and equity for all learners. This article critically examines the policy with reference to inclusivity across gender, caste, socio-economic background, culture, language, and disability. Drawing on secondary data sources such as UDISE+ (2021–22) and AISHE (2020–21), as well as scholarly works, this study explores the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing NEP 2020. The findings indicate significant progress in creating an inclusive education framework through measures such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones, and the integration of vocational and multidisciplinary learning. However, barriers including inadequate infrastructure, gender disparities, socio-cultural norms, technological divides, and teacher preparedness remain pressing. Comparisons with international education policies underscore the need for India to strengthen implementation, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement. This article concludes that while NEP 2020 has transformative potential, achieving inclusivity demands sustained investment, collaborative governance, and a cultural shift toward valuing diversity in education.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Education, NEP 2020, Disability, Gender, Equity

Introduction

India's educational trajectory has historically been guided by landmark policies-the National Policy on Education (1968), revised versions in 1986 and 1992, and now the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Unlike its predecessors, NEP 2020 emphasises inclusivity and equity as cornerstones of educational reform (Government of India, 2020). This emphasis aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which

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aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). Inclusivity in the Indian context requires recognising and addressing the diverse needs of learners across caste, class, gender, religion, ability, and geography. NEP 2020 aims to create equal learning opportunities by reshaping both school and higher education through multidisciplinary learning, vocational exposure, digital integration, and equitable infrastructure development. Importantly, the policy identifies children with special needs (CWSN), transgender learners, and marginalised communities as critical beneficiaries of reforms. Yet, the promise of inclusivity faces persistent challenges. Infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, digital divides, socio-economic barriers, and gender inequalities continue to obstruct equitable learning (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). In India, inclusion in education means providing equal opportunities to all to learn and develop skills to become productive members of society. This is possible only through the provision of proper infrastructure in schools and colleges, which will help in the academic and co-curricular advancement of students and teachers with diverse backgrounds. Most infrastructure-like buildings, libraries, playgrounds, and facilities such as books, laboratories and computers are not specific to everyone's needs. However, one essential aspect of access to education is the availability of maintained toilets; these are not available everywhere. Similarly, the availability of ramps, handrails, signs, brail etc. in educational premises is essential for easing the trials of children with special needs.

Higher education in India includes undergraduate and postgraduate levels for students across our diverse population. The distinctive feature of higher education in India is the preponderance of traditional streams over STEM (science, technology, engineering, and medicine) courses. Efforts are being made to address this situation to improve young people's employability. This issue is raised in the new NEP2020, which prepares students to learn specific skills only at the school level, a major advantage of this policy.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary sources. Key sources include: the official NEP 2020 document (Government of India, 2020); Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2021–22 Flash Statistics (Ministry of Education, 2022a); All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21 (Ministry of Education, 2022b); and peer-reviewed research articles, policy reports, and news analyses. The analysis focuses on three dimensions

of inclusivity: (1) school-level inclusivity (infrastructure, enrolment, gender balance, disability access), (2) higher education inclusivity (participation by gender, caste, and socio-economic groups), and (3) policy support mechanisms (funding, teacher training, digital access, and global alignment).

Findings and Discussion

To understand inclusivity in the education system in India, it is necessary to first understand the NEP 2020. The main features of NEP2020 are given in Figure 1.

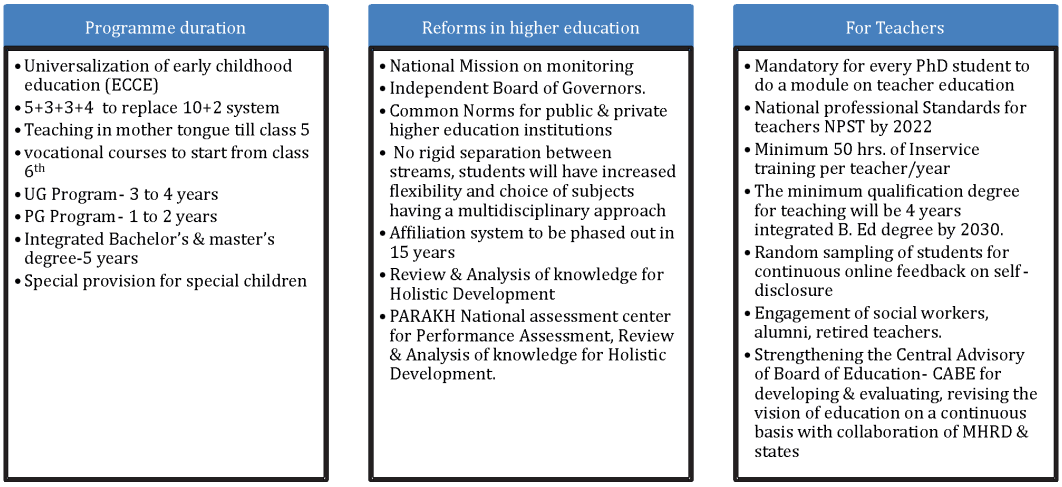

Figure 1: Important features of NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 reimagines India's education system with a holistic and inclusive outlook. It emphasises universal access, equitable infrastructure, gender inclusion, multilingualism, vocational integration, and teacher training. Data from UDISE+ (2021–22) reveal significant progress but also highlight large gaps in infrastructure—only 401,487 schools have toilets for CWSN, and fewer than 750,000 schools have ramps with handrails (Ministry of Education, 2022a). Gender disparities persist, as enrolment of girls falls sharply at secondary and higher secondary levels. AISHE (2020–21) shows GER for males (29.3%) exceeds that for females (24.9%), with disciplinary segregation still prominent (Ministry of Education, 2022b). NEP 2020 seeks to address these inequities through measures such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones, and scholarship schemes. However, infrastructure gaps, socio-economic barriers, digital divides, and lack of teacher preparedness remain major challenges.

NEP 2020 for people with disabilities

When we talk about people with disabilities, the NEP 2020 includes many aspects for the future. As described in our constitution, the fundamental rights include the right to equality, freedom, the right against exploitation, the right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights, and the right to constitutional remedies. These rights apply to every citizen of the country, including diverse populations with varying conditions and disabilities. So, NEP2020 also implies principles for empowerment of persons with disabilities i.e. Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons, non-discrimination, full and effective participation and inclusion in society, respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity, equality of opportunity, equality between men and women, respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities & Accessibility for persons with disabilities. An accessible physical environment benefits everyone, not just people with disabilities. NEP 2020 also includes accessibility standards that should be as consistent as possible with international standards, such as those of the ISO, while considering the local context. Regarding the built environment, ISO21542:2011, Building construction- accessibility and usability of the built environment, delineates a set of requirements and recommendations concerning construction, assembly, components and fittings. There is a provision for measures to eliminate obstacles and barriers to indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, medical facilities, and workplaces. These would include not only buildings but also footpaths, curb cuts, and other obstacles that block pedestrian traffic. Besides these, there are many barriers to implementation of professional learning programs in terms of Technological barriers like lack of access to library resources, limited resources of assistive devices, lack of uniform assessment schemes, lack of statistical report, lack of access to the internet, especially in the remote areas, lack of digital infrastructure and materials, as well as professional & personal barriers such as lack of ongoing professional learning opportunities, lack of resources (special education teachers, para professionals), Incoherent teacher training to adapt to new-age technologies, increased work load, non-availability of instructional materials, ethical concerns about the use of human participants, lack of familiarity with the research process. and even social barriers like lack of inclusion policies impacting teacher training,

lack of collaboration, poor communication between stakeholders, large population and cultural myths.

Inclusion situation under the level of school education in India

An essential criterion of inclusivity is the provision of adequate infrastructure for students across different categories in schools. Since students spend a major portion of their day on school premises, the lack of adequate toilet facilities is a major hindrance to education. This is true for both boys and girls, as well as for children with special needs. According to data from UDISE 2021-22, shown in the table below, most schools in India have toilets for girls and boys, though the number of functional toilets is much lower than the number reported as available. A bigger concern is the lower number of schools with CWSN toilet facilities. This shows that India still has a long way to go in providing services to its differently abled population. Only 10 lakh schools have ramps, and fewer than 7.5 lakh have ramps and handrails for wheelchair access.

Table 1: Number of schools with various inclusion parameters in India

Parameter	*No. of schools*
Total no. of schools (India)	1489115
Girls' toilet	1439898
Functional girls' toilet	1398305
Boy' toilet	1404342
Functional boys' toilet	1353081
Ramp	1069795
Ramp and handrails	740395
Schools with CWSN toilet facilities	401487

Source: UDISE+ 2021-22, Table 2, Page 28-29

When discussing student enrolment at various levels, it is assumed that no child will be willing to forgo the opportunity for education. From table 2, more than 26 crore children are currently enrolled on school education in India. Out of this, around 12 crore students are in the primary level, with another 6 crores studying in the upper primary level, bringing the total enrolled students at the elementary level to above 18 crore 86 lakh. But this number begins to fall at the secondary and higher secondary levels, with fewer than 4 crore students in classes 9-10 and fewer than 3 crore at the plus-two level. This trend points to a reduced availability of educational opportunities as the level of schooling rises.

Table 2: Enrolment of students at various levels of school education in India (in Lakhs)

Total (Pre-Primary to 12)	*Pre-primary*	*Primary (1 to 5)*	*Upper Primary (6-8)*	*Elementary (1-8)*	*Secondary (9-10)*	*Higher Secondary (11-12)*
2652.35	94.95	1218.42	667.90	1886.32	385.28	285.79

Source: UDISE+2021-22, Table 5.1, Pg 73

Further, analysis of the data from the UDISE+ 2021-22 survey shows a perceptible difference between the sexes in access to education. The number of girl students is always less than the number of boys at all levels of education – elementary, secondary, or higher secondary (Table 3). As the level of education increases, there is lower participation by females, reducing their overall educational attainment in the present and in the future. This trend has been widely observed even at the higher education levels, including colleges and universities.

Table 3: Enrolment by gender and level of school education (in lakhs)

Pre-Primary			Primary			Upper-Primary			Elementary			Secondary			Higher secondary		
Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
50.51	44.43	94.95	63.51	583.24	1218.42	345.11	322.78	667.91	980.29	906.03	1886.32	200.71	184.56	385.28	147.47	138.31	285.79

Source: UDISE+ 2021-22, Table 5.6, Pg 78-79 and authors' calculations

Table 3 (continue): Enrolment by gender and level of school education (in lakhs)

Pre-Primary			*Primary*			*Upper-Primary*			*Elementary*			*Secondary*			*Higher secondary*		
Boys	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*
50.51	44.43	94.95	63.51	583.24	1218.42	345.11	322.78	667.91	980.29	906.03	1886.32	200.71	184.56	385.28	147.47	138.31	285.79

Source: UDISE+ 2021-22, Table 5.6, Pg 78-79 and authors' calculations

The new education policy has stressed that inclusion implies that all, including those with special needs, must be provided with equal opportunities for education. Table4 displays the number of CWSN at various levels of school education with gender-based diversification at each level being specified.

Table 4: Enrolment of Children with Special Needs (CWSN) by gender and level of school education (in lakhs)

Primary			Upper-Primary			Elementary			Secondary			Higher secondary		
Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
6.72	4.59	11.31	4.03	3.06	7.10	10.76	7.65	18.41	1.61	1.26	2.88	0.61	0.49	1.10

Source: UDISE+ 2021-11, Table 5.11, page 88-89 and authors' calculations.

The gross enrolment ratio GER) is an important parameter to compare the enrolment at a specific level of education to the age group which is most appropriate to that education level. The values shown in table 5 below represent enrolment at the elementary (consisting of primary and upper primary), secondary and higher secondary levels as a percentage of population of that age group. It is relevant to point out that UDISE+2021-22 report holds that GER greater than 100% may be due to presence of over or under-age children in that level of education.

Table 5: Gross enrolment ratio by gender and level of school education

	Primary			*Upper-Primary*			*Elementary*			*Secondary*			*Higher secondary*		
	Boys	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Total*
All	102.1	104.8	103.4	94.5	94.9	94.7	99.3	101.1	100.1	79.7	79.4	79.6	57.0	58.2	57.6
SC	111.5	114.9	113.1	103.1	104.5	103.8	108.4	111.0	109.7	84.2	85.6	84.9	59.5	63.7	61.5
ST	106.3	106.7	106.5	98.3	97.6	98.0	103.4	103.3	103.4	77.0	79.2	78.1	50.5	53.6	52.0

Source: UDISE+ 2021-22, Table 6.1-6.3, pages 109-111 and authors' calculations

In this regard, the authors would like to point out that the gross enrolment ratio is close to and even above 100 at the elementary level (classes 1 to 8). However, this data may be more due to the lure of freebies such as midday meals, books and uniforms rather than an actual push towards education. At the secondary and higher secondary levels, the GER has fallen, reflecting the difficulty most students face in continuing the strenuous level of learning associated with classes 9 to 12.

Inclusion situation under the level of higher education in India

Access to higher education is widely demanded on the grounds of democracy and wider (equal) participation in the public sphere. Since independence, India has made many strides with various strategies, primarily affirmative action, to make higher education accessible for socially and culturally marginalised groups, girls, SCs and STs.

According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21 report, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (henceforth GER) in higher education in India was 27.1 per cent. The GER for male students was 29.3 per cent, and for female students, it was 24.9 per cent. The highest GER was recorded in Tamil Nadu (49.3 per cent), and the lowest in Bihar (14.9 per cent). The report also stated that, out of the total enrolment in higher education, 51.6 per cent were enrolled in undergraduate programs, 26.2 per cent in postgraduate programs, and 22.2 per cent in PhD programs. Given these vast gaps exist in GER, the New Education Policy

(2020) identifies certain facets of exclusion, that are including "lack of knowledge of higher education opportunities, economic opportunity cost of pursuing higher education, financial constraints, admission processes, geographical and language barriers, poor employability potential of many higher education programs, and lack of appropriate student support mechanisms".

However, there are significant disparities in the enrolment of females in different levels and types of higher education institutions. Chanana (2000) analyses the disciplinary choices that are made by women in higher education in the socio-economic context. Thus, the enrolment of females in technical and professional courses is much lower than in arts and science courses. In addition, female enrolment is lower in top-ranked institutions and in rural areas. Moreover, while the enrolment of females in higher education has increased, there is still a gender gap in access to higher education, particularly in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities.

Besides, there are still socio-economic factors, e.g., Class (if a woman is from the upper middle class, she is likely to take professional courses to expand her own independence in later life), that determine course choices. Indeed, the disciplinary choices are, to a great extent, made by parents and are seen by them as an opportunity to make an upward marriage proposal. Similarly, girls' enrolment at higher levels varies by caste and region.

Sahni & Shanker (2012) studied girls' participation in higher education in the state of Maharashtra. Although the participation of girls in higher education has expanded enormously over the period, social and cultural contingencies play a crucial role in which courses they access and where. For instance, many girls' education and instruction are given in vernacular languages that implicitly (or explicitly) affect their life chances of getting jobs and so on. Similarly, their presence is largely in the social sciences and humanities rather than in engineering and medicine. This highlights the need for targeted efforts to increase the enrolment and retention of female students, including financial assistance, safe and inclusive campus environments, and gender-sensitive curricula and teaching methods.

NEP2020 also ensures conversion of public documents published as of a specified year and all current websites meeting the relevant International Organisation. Public documents are all documents issued by the national government, including publications, laws, reports, regulations, forms, and informational brochures.

NEP and India's Finance Sector

A country's economy is heavily dependent on business and management, and studying it benefits the economy, as it affects not only economic sectors such as banking, manufacturing, services, and technological advancement but also non-economic sectors. The brain of industry and building an understanding of how to manage industry will involve both management and business. The Government is much aware about this and that's the reason our current NEP or current education policy is mainly focusing on involving practical aspects too in place of traditional method being followed for a long time where theoretical subjects are being into main focus, which also leaves the students with very few chances to learn and it every time is becoming is a major barrier for them to be market or job ready. Also, as the economy is not limited by boundaries nowadays, to cater to the demands of the global labour market, the NEP aims to promote practical exposure, creative possibilities, and critical skills.

No one will disagree that there could be no better investment in the future of society than providing quality education & services for youth. Through NEP, Center & States are aiming to significantly increase investment in education by aiming to reach *6% of GDP from the current around 4% of GDP*. The government also aims to provide financial support for various components of education and will ensure that better & best service conditions are provided in and by schools to the teachers and students so that a well-managed structure of teaching and learning is developed. The basic, adequate, or secure infrastructural and non-infrastructural facilities, such as computing, internet, libraries, offline & online platforms for practical learning & exposure, and sports and recreational facilities, will be the focus of public & private educational organisations.

As a priority under the NEP Policy, the program has also launched a "Gender Inclusion Fund" and "Special Education Zones" to develop our nation's capacity to make equitable, quality education easily available and accessible to all students. National Scholarship Mission by providing platform of National Scholarship Portal has opened a door where in partnership of government & private, lots of funds are generated and can be generated, i.e., 50% of its funds can be contributed from private including population of business or households or citizens on 100% tax-exempt basis, and whereas the government contributes 50% of the total amount.

Talking about private sector opportunities, as our modern education world has moved towards digital media, various schools, colleges and educational institutes

require funds to get their digital infrastructure improved, and the various banks, non-banking financial institutions and other private finance institutes have taken birth to offer funds & financial loans to the required educational organisations. The companies offering financial services can now work hand in hand with the National Scholarship Portal to provide support to students seeking scholarships. In NEP 2020, the focus is on vocational education; the need for funding for these courses will arise as well. Students who are pursuing their normal school or college studies, who are not financially sound, and who are not able to complete their education by acquiring a traditional/market degree can look for courses that prepare them to enter the market by learning the required skills. It would require funds not for students' learning but for educational institutions and the equipment and supplies needed for education. In a country like ours, where the range of demands is always high, the government and private partnerships can play a major role in the successful implementation of the NEP.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen infrastructure with accessible toilets, ramps, digital labs, and inclusive classrooms across schools.
2. Invest in sustained professional learning programs for teachers focusing on inclusive pedagogy.
3. Establish independent monitoring bodies to track inclusivity targets under NEP 2020.
4. Promote gender equity in STEM by offering scholarships, mentorship, and safe campus spaces.
5. Expand low-cost digital solutions and community-based learning centres in rural areas.
6. Encourage global collaboration by learning from international best practices adapted to India's socio-cultural realities.

The professionals should handle education strategies from the entry stage through rapport-building with the community. Proper participatory appraisal of needs, resources and cultural/contextual considerations is needed. Activities such as awareness generation, partnerships, ownership of activities, and active participation are essential to implement professional learning programs that support teachers in teaching students with diverse needs in an inclusive manner. Professional learning

programs must be based on evidence-based practices and fulfil the school district's requirements. Moreover, inclusion of the third gender and other members of society in schools and colleges, and as teachers, helps build them into productive members of society.

Conclusion

The NEP2020 is a catalyst in many ways for the Indian education system as it blossoms into the world's largest workforce, including persons with disabilities, in the coming year. To fulfil this dream, we must overcome substantial execution challenges sustainably. NEP2020 policies recognise the lack of teacher training to address the learning needs of every student, and to monitor fake data and fraudulent activities. The most important thing is that NEP2020 emphasises that education must move away from content and towards learning to think critically, solve problems, be creative and multidisciplinary, innovate, adapt, and absorb new material in novel and challenging fields. In this regard, India needs an estimated 7 million plus teachers to address the huge student population, and the current pool of teachers also must be oriented towards the new-age teaching techniques with limited resources of assistive devices, as India is having huge population and limited professional resources. Inclusion means a change in our attitude & acceptance levels. That comes only after awareness and training. Despite barriers, India is on the right path. Many trend marks are setting up. We have also seen special individuals performing amazingly in service departments, sports, etc., which gives us HOPE that proper education for the diverse members of India, along with inclusivity and skill training, under the umbrella of NEP2020, will boost the development of our country.

The New Education Policy 2020 is a catalyst for reimagining education in India. Its emphasis on inclusivity reflects a progressive step toward equity, justice, and empowerment for marginalised groups. However, significant barriers remain-gender disparities, disability access, socio-economic divides, and infrastructural gaps. Inclusivity in education is not merely a policy objective but a societal commitment. For NEP 2020 to succeed, India must invest in infrastructure, teacher training, financial support, and community participation. With sustained efforts, NEP 2020 has the potential to transform India into a model of 21st-century inclusive education.

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