



Incorporation of Marginalized Communities in Education: A Critical Analysis of NEP-2020

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ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental right of a child and it is a powerful instrument for societal reform. Education is widely acknowledged as a critical instrument for social transformation and inclusive development. In India however educational opportunities and outcomes remain deeply unequal across the social groups due to historical, economic, cultural, and institutional factors (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represented a major reform initiative aimed at addressing these inequalities through foregrounding equity, inclusion, and access for marginalized communities, collectively termed as Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). This paper critically examined the extent to which NEP-2020 facilitated the incorporation of marginalized communities into the mainstream education system. Using secondary data such as UDISE+ 2024-25 report, research articles and policy document, the study analyses access, participation, retention at school and higher education levels. The findings revealed that while NEP-2020 provides a comprehensive and progressive framework for inclusive education, significant implementation challenges persist, particularly in the terms



1. Introduction

Education is necessary for advancing equity and justice throughout society. Across the globe, education is seen as a basic human right and a powerful tool for fostering improvements in society. However, it is very difficult for disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities, and person with disabilities to have equal opportunities for accessing educational platform in India due to historical systemic of exclusion and deeply rooted social hierarchies. Marginalized groups face several deprivations—social, economic, cultural, and geographic. These obstacles result in diminished enrollment rates, high dropout rates, and poor learning results. Discrimination, poverty, language obstacles, and systematic neglect have intensified educational inequities (Tilak, 2007). Marginalization in education refers to systematic exclusion or unequal participant of certain groups due to socio-economic, cultural, geographic, or institutional factors. NEP-2020 categorized marginalized communities under the umbrella of Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), recognizing that educational disadvantage is multidimensional rather than singular. NEP-2020 wants to fill gaps among all groups by improving accessible, equitable, and inclusive educational system for all society groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). The NEP-2020, which prioritizes "equity and inclusion as the foundation of all educational decisions," signifies a substantial transformation in India's educational framework. Systemic exclusion has resulted to considerable disparities in educational attainment, which it recognizes and attempts to close through a range of targeted strategies. The policy seeks to provide a flexible and holistic approach from ECCE to higher education, guaranteeing that every student can use freely their full potential regardless of their social status, economic status, gender, caste, religion, or status as disabled (Ministry of Education, 2020). NEP-2020 has included a notable innovation: the establishment of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in regions with a substantial population from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). The Ministry of Education (2020) states that the objective of these SEZs is to provide enhanced support and resources which meet the specific needs of marginalized groups. The policy states the importance of inclusive curricula, gender inclusion funds, and diverse curriculum content that fosters respect for all cultures to establish a more welcoming educational environment (NEP, 2020). Furthermore, NEP-2020 recognizes the complex nature of marginalization by emphasizing how several identities, such as a child's tribe affiliation, his disability, and his minority status, can compound educational disadvantages. The policy fosters the development of local innovations and context-specific initiatives to effectively tackle these



complexities of exclusion (Kumar, 2021). Emphasizing on professional and vocational education, flexible learning approach, and basic literacy and numeracy also aims to make education more effective and accessible to a larger group of individuals. Everyone has a right to high-quality education, which is a fundamental right and more than just a service, according to the NEP-2020, which vitally restates the constitutional commitment to social justice using Article 21A (Right to Education) and Directive Principles of State Policy (Bordoloi, 2021). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has taken different transformative initiatives to increase educational equity and inclusion for marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It presents a comprehensive and strategic framework to tackle exclusion and develop inclusive education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 delineates the creation of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in areas with elevated dropout rates among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) to implement targeted interventions designed to mitigate educational disparities (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 24). Recognizing the cultural and linguistic diversity of students, the policy supports flexible and multilingual education and promotes the use of the mother tongue or native language as the medium of teaching till at least until Grade 5 and preferably until Grade 8 (p. 13). The development of an inclusive curriculum and pedagogy that integrates ideas of equity, inclusion, and respect for diversity across a number of areas is emphasized by the NEP 2020 (p. 6, 24). It promotes the development of textbooks that highlight positive role models from many communities, therefore cultivating a sense of belonging and aspiration among marginalized groups (p. 24). The strategy enhances financial aid initiatives, including model residential schools (e.g., Eklavya Model Residential Schools) and specific scholarships aimed at supporting learners from socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) (p.25).

Despite this ambitious design, the program's success will mostly depend on how well it is implemented, how well resources are provided, and how closely it is watched to ensure that the most disadvantaged individuals benefit as planned. The NEP-2020 vision's incorporation of marginalized groups is an essential measure in establishing an educational system that is socially and intellectually equitable. India's demographic dividend might be transformed into an empowered population capable of making significant contributions to the nation's progress.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by following objectives:

- 1- To examine the provisions of NEP-2020 related to marginalized communities.
- 2- To analyze recent trends in access, enrollment, and retention among marginalized communities.



3- To identify strengths and limitations in the implementation of NEP-2020.

3. Method and Material

3.1. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary sources of data. Data has been collected from UDISE+ (2023-25), Government policy document, and research articles between 2020-2025 focusing on incorporation of marginalized communities such Schedule Cast (SC), Schedule Trib (ST), and Muslim.

3.2. **Inclusion Criteria:** Studies conducted between 2020–2025, and UDISE+2024-25 report, focusing on participation, retention, digital access of SC, ST, OBC and Muslim children at School and Higher Levels.

3.3. **Exclusion Criteria:** Non-Marginalized communities. Opinion pieces without empirical data, and duplicate articles.

3.4. **Data Analysis:** Thematic synthesis under two major domains: Positive and negative impacts of initiatives of NEP-2020 regarding of marginalized communities such as SC, ST, OBC and Muslim communities.

4. Results

UDISE+2024-25 data and other studies indicated mixed outcomes of NEP-2020 initiatives for marginalized communities. SC 17.8%, ST 9.9% OBC 45.2% and minority 15.9% students continue to constitute a substantial share of school enrollment, reflecting sustained access. Dropout Rates have declined with primary dropout near 0.3% and secondary around 8-11%, indicating improved retention. Secondary level GER has improved SC 70.8%, ST 66.9% suggesting better transitions. However, absolute enrollment indicated slight declines, and foundational GER remained weak, while higher education inclusion faces persistent financial and digital barriers.

NEP-2020 and Marginalized communities: Policy critique and achievement Table based on UDISE+ 2024-25

| NEP-2020 Goals | Key Provision for Marginalized Communities | Observed outcomes | Achievements | Critical Gaps/ Policy concerns |
|------------------|--|-------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Universal access | Universal | SC 17.8%, ST | Sustained | Absolute |



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| and Participation | enrollment, inclusion of SC, ST, OBC, and Minorities, outreach to SEDGs. | 9.9%, OBC 45.2%, Minorities 15.9% of total enrollment. | proportional representation indicated continued access for marginalized groups | enrollments have declined across categories, suggesting access is maintained but not expanding |
| Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) | Emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy, universal pre-school access | Foundational GER remained weak, especially for SC and ST children | Policy framework acknowledged early disadvantage | Weak foundational GER indicated delayed entry and irregular participation among marginalized children |
| Retention and Dropout Reduction | 100% retention target, scholarships, midday meal, | Primary dropout 0.3% secondary dropout 8-11% | Significant reduction in reported dropout rates | Retention does not necessarily reflect quality or engagement |
| Transition to Secondary Education | Targeted incentives for SC/ST students, scholarships | Secondary GER improved | Indicated better transition from elementary to secondary stages | Gained uneven across region, transition to higher secondary weak especially for girls and ST. |
| Higher Education inclusion | Flexible entry/exit, Academic bank of credits | Persistent financial and digital barriers reported in studies | Policy intent acknowledges post school equity | Limited translation of school level gained into higher education access |
| Governance and Implementation | Decentralized planning, data driven monitoring | Regular data availability and monitoring | Improved transparency and evidence-based | Implementation capacity varies widely across |



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5. Discussion

5.1. Participation of Marginalized communities

UDISE+ 2024-25 data revealed that Marginalized groups remained substantially present in school system, with SC students comprising about 17.8% of total enrollment and ST learners about 9.9%, while OBC students account for 45.2% and minorities approximately 15.9%. This suggests that the policy's equity emphasis has not reserved access for marginalized groups despite broader demographic shifts. However, the report also revealed overall enrollment declines across categories, including those of SC, ST, OBC and minority students compared to previous cycles. For example, SC students' enrollment fell from 4.47 crore to 4.39 crore between 2023-24 and 2024-25, and similar small declines were seen among ST and OBC learners, signaling that participation gains are fragile and uneven. Importantly, gross enrollment ratios (GERs) presented a nuanced picture. At foundational levels, SC GER declined from 40.4% to 38.8%, but at secondary stages, GERs improved for both SC 70.8% and ST 66.9% learners. This may reflect better progression at higher secondary stages, possibly linked to targeted retention measures. Some scholars argue that proportional stability can mask systemic exclusion, particularly when overall school enrollment contracts due migration, privatization or economic distress. NEP-2020's emphasis on universal access has therefore not yet translated into expanded participation, especially among the most vulnerable first generation learners. (Tilak, 2023).

5.2. Retention and Dropout Trends

A central aim of NEP-2020 is to reduce attrition and achieve near universal retention across schooling. UDISE+ 2024-25 indicated significant reductions in dropout rates. Preparatory level dropout fell about 2.3%, middle to 3.5% and secondary to 8.2% in 2024-25. Retention rates likewise revealed notable improvements. Improved retention likely reflected the combined effect of enhanced schooling infrastructure, increased teacher strength and targeted retention programs. Some scholars argue that improved retention doesn't necessarily imply meaningful engagement or learning continuity, as marginalized students often remain enrolled without adequate academic or psychological support. However, secondary level retention remained substantially lower 47.2%, underscoring persistent attrition as students transition to large grades despite national commitment to universal secondary education by 2030.



5.3. Participation-Retention Dynamics and Challenges

5.3.1. Uneven Participation Across Levels

Although secondary level GER improvements for marginalized students are encouraging, but foundational GER declines specially among SC students highlighted ongoing access gaps in early schooling. Persistent low GER at early stages suggest that policy initiatives have yet to fully address age-appropriate enrollment and timely school entry, particularly among marginalized communities.

5.3.2. Socio-Economic Barriers

Empirical studies emphasized that economic constraints, digital exclusion, language barriers, and limited institutional support continue to hinder inclusive participation, especially in higher education. Such barriers reflect structural inequities that persist despite policy frameworks. NEP-2020's aspirations require complementary socio-economic measures, robust implementation, and local adaptation to truly improve educational equity for marginalized groups.

5.3.3. Implementation

UDISE+ data also showed improvements in schooling infrastructure and support system that underpin retention. For example, increased teacher workforce number, increased pupil-teacher ratios better than NEP benchmarks, widespread school electrification, and expanding digital access and physical accessibility for marginalized communities on the ground level, not only on the paper. Otherwise, many commission and committees came into after independence which took various steps and initiatives to enhance the education and inclusion of disadvantaged groups. The Kothari Commission (1964–66) presented such a system and created such a school system in which all groups could be given equal education without discrimination and the talents of all children could be highlighted. He believed that the destiny of children is shaped and formed in school itself (Kothari Commission, 1966). A number of actions were taken by National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) to encourage the integration of ST, SC, OBC, and minority populations in school, improve their quality of education with all other children, and boost their enrollment (MHRD, 1986; MHRD, 1992). Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2001) seeks to offer a range of interventions for universal access and retention by addressing gender and social category disparities in elementary education and enhancing learning quality. The programme seeks to preserve the infrastructure of existing schools and build new ones in areas lacking educational resources through the provision of additional classrooms, bathrooms, drinking water, maintenance grants, and school development grants. Likewise, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA, 2009) aimed to



improve access to secondary education for marginalized populations (MHRD, 2009). The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, initiated in 1995, significantly enhanced enrollment and retention rates among vulnerable children (Dreze & Goyal, 2003). Additional targeted initiatives encompassed the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV, 2004), which instituted residential schools for girls from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and minority communities, alongside various scholarship programs designed to mitigate dropout rates among SC, ST, OBC, and minority students (MHRD, 2004; Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2013). These schemes were supplemented by significant proposals from educational committees. The Yash Pal Committee (2009) condemned the prevalence of rote learning and advocated for comprehensive educational reforms (Yash Pal Committee, 2009). Despite these initiatives, structural gaps remained, primarily as a result of poor finance, poor implementation, and ingrained sociocultural impediments (Bhatty, 2014).

Conclusion

NEP-2020 initiatives have yielded measurable, through uneven, improvements for marginalized communities in terms of participation and retention as reflected in UDISE+ 2024-25 data and other studies. Participation continued presence of SC, ST, OBC and minority students with improving secondary GERs suggests progress, but declines in absolute enrollments and foundational GERs indicated ongoing access challenges. Dropout rates have declined significantly and retention rates improved across levels and Challenges persistent socio-economic barriers, digital divides, and implementation gaps constrain particularly in higher education and early schooling access. NEP-2020's equity principles are sound, effective implementation, targeted supports, and strong governance are vital for marginalized communities to fully benefit from the policy's inclusivity aspirations. Overall, NEP-2020 has strengthened frameworks for inclusion and yielded positive trends in retention and transition.

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