NEP 2020 and the Promise of Equity Reality Check on Its Impact on the Human Rights of the Disadvantaged

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Abstract: *Education for all. Against this backdrop, many entrenched socio-economic factors, digital exclusion, financial constraints, and cultural marginalisation question the implementation of such a policy. These disparities hinder access to education and raise serious concerns about human rights, which constitute the premise of social justice and empowerment. The escalation of privatisation in education offers a greater rift between those who can afford an education and those who cannot, as the former sees education as a privilege rather than a right. This paper analyses the NEP 2020 The NEP 2020 seeks the transformative shift ushering in inclusive, equitable, and quality from a human rights perspective in relation to its promises and perils and the experience of marginalized communities. It strongly argues for an urgent need for higher public investment, equitable digital access, gender-sensitive policies, and inclusive linguistic frameworks. Bridging the gap between policy and practice is necessary to ensure that NEP 2020 does not remain a good document on education but one that causes meaningful change upholding the right to education for all.*

Keywords: NEP 2020, Equity, GER, Marginalized Communities, Digital Divide, Financial Barriers, Caste Discrimination, Rural Education, Policy Implementation

1. Introduction

The key to social mobility and empowerment and, one might say, economic development has always been through education. Meeting educational goals is, therefore, not merely a policy issue in a diverse and complex country like India, where deeply entrenched inequalities exist; it is a fundamental human right. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has been formulated to overhaul the Indian education system toward being inclusive, holistic, and flexible. The NEP 2020 therefore aims to reduce the barriers between privilege and deprivation by rendering opportunities to marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities, and economically weaker sections. But the question is, Has NEP 2020 really fulfilled its promise of equity? Has it empowered the disadvantaged? Or does it create new forms of educational disenfranchisement? In a country where millions continue to struggle to access quality education due to economic, social, and systemic hurdles, an honest inquiry on this would be whether it safeguards or threatens the human rights of the underprivileged section. This research paper engages in a critical examination of the impact of NEP 2020 on the right to education, specifically concerning marginalized communities. By evaluating its provisions, the challenges in implementation, and the voices of the disadvantaged groups, this study attempts to assess the on-the-ground existence of the policy as an attempt towards equality or yet another layer of exclusion in independent India.

2. Objectives of the study

- To evaluate the extent to which NEP 2020 propagates the values of equity, inclusion, and human rights standards in education.
- To identify the barriers, which include caste, gender, regional, and digital disparities that have hindered access for marginalised communities.
- To identify how privatisation and commercialisation impact the affordability and access of education for these disadvantaged groups.
- To analyse the gaps in the implementation of NEP 2020 and their significance in the right to education as a fundamental human right.

3. Evolution of the Education System in India and Key Policy Impacts

Pre-Independence Education System
India had such a diverse and informal education system before British rule, with gurukuls and madrasas, mostly using local customs and needs. It had caste-based exclusions as well as being inaccessible for most marginalized people. The British introduced a centralized education system, the primary objective of which was to fulfil colonial needs. In Macaulay's Minute (1835), where the medium of instruction for the elite was promoted as English, and later in Wood's Dispatch (1854), they institutionalized schooling but restricted it to a few only, leaving many marginalized from education.

Post-Independence Educational Reforms
After independence, India made concerted efforts to provide a more equitable education system, especially for the disadvantaged.
- **Kothari Commission (1964-66):** It recommended the establishment of a common school system to promote equality; however, there were many challenges to its implementation.
- **National Policy on Education 1968**: Aimed at bridging the gap between marginalized groups and general population but limited by finances and infrastructure.

- **NPE 1986/1992:** Universalisation of education and inclusion of the disadvantaged were focal points, yet quality gaps and regional disparities remained.
- **RTE Act (2009):** Provided for free and compulsory education to children aged 6-14 years. It faced severe challenges, however, in rural and tribal areas, in terms of framework and resources.

NEP 2020 and Its Impact

The NEP 2020 aims to provide equitable, inclusive, and quality education keeping in mind the advancement of technology, vocational training, and multilingual education[.1] Though it promises considerable changes, its success depends largely on changing the scenarios for the implementation and the needs of the marginalized sections of rural and tribal areas.

Impact on Marginalized Groups

Kalita (2024) states that "NEP 2020 is based on the principle that every child, including those with disabilities and marginalized communities, has the right to access quality education in a supportive and non-discriminatory environment" Some significant reform in policies, but caste-based discrimination, gender bias, and economic inequity restrict access to quality education for marginalized communities. Historical and systemic exclusions continue, while policies like NEP 2020 provide frameworks for inclusion; those barriers are mostly regional and financial in nature, limiting genuine educational equity.

NEP 2020: Vision and Key Provisions for Equity

By prioritising equity, the policy seeks to dismantle barriers that impede the educational journey of marginalised communities, ensuring their meaningful participation in the learning process (Sinakou et al., 2017). The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 is thus a landmark policy in India whereby education will be more inclusive, holistic, and skill-based. An education system would thus provide equal opportunity for all children, irrespective of socio-economic status. Even though the provisions suggest that the policy is committed to inclusivity, the real challenge is to deal with historical educational exclusion of the underprivileged sectors.

Core Objectives of NEP 2020 Related to Equity

The NEP 2020 envisions a system of education where access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability are assured. In a nutshell, some of the main objectives that address the issue of marginality are:

1) **Universalisation of Education:**
   - Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): To lay a strong foundation for learning, bridging access through Anganwadis and pre-schools.
   - Under the Right to Education (RTE), Act children aged 3–18 years will be covered; thus, education is extended to even wider age-determined access.
2) **Flexible Multidisciplinary Learning:**
   - A new system of 5+3+3+4 will be in place to substitute the old one of 10+2, giving priority to foundational learning and boosting critical thinking.
   - Vocational education will be included from Grade 6 to develop skills for underprivileged children.

3) **Regional Languages and Mother Tongue Promotion:**
   - Encouraging the use of the local language as a medium of instruction to remove linguistic barriers for the children, especially in rural and tribal areas.
4) **Enhanced Focus on Disadvantaged Groups:**
   - Formation of Gender Inclusion Fund and Special Education Zone to provide services to marginalized communities.
   - Provide scholarships and financial assistance to SCs, STs, OBCs, and EWS students to guarantee equal access to education, thus maintaining equity.
5) **Technology-based Education:**
   - Digital interventions are being spread through platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM to reduce the rural-urban divide and provide quality education through various online platforms.

The intent of these provisions seems to be to address every kind of disparity in education, bringing in an overall conception of marginalized communities. However, the wholesome implementation of these reforms remains an issue in the context of underprivileged areas where resources, infrastructure, and quality education are scarce.

Potential Benefits of NEP 2020 for the Disadvantaged

The NEP 2020 holds the potential towards empowering marginalized communities if properly implemented, breaking down crucial barriers to education. Some of the more pronounced benefits that the NEP 2020 may confer upon disadvantaged communities include:

Lower Dropout Rates: With its focus on early childhood education, financial support, and inclusive schooling, NEP 2020 could keep disadvantaged students in school longer, thereby reducing the rate of early school leaving.

Localized Learning: Mother tongue-based education encouraged through NEP 2020 could help tribal and rural students break through barriers as they often find it challenging to receive instruction in a second language.

Skills-based Education: The introduction of vocational education from Grade 6 onwards would provide disadvantaged youth with some skills training, which may eventually help him/her get better job opportunities and prepare him/her for a better livelihood.

Enhanced Digital Access: With a thrust on digital learning platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM, the policy could better reach out to rural and underserved communities and help bridge the digital divide in accessing quality education.

Yet, as these provisions seem to be lifting the sails with glowing promises, the burning issue remains to be raised: whether in practice NEP 2020 would be conforming to the promises made, and this follows with the next section of this study, which will then critically discuss some challenges arising in the implementation of NEP 2020 and establish whether it will deliver or is indeed a promise made.

Challenges in Implementing NEP 2020: Reality vs. Promise

Implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India presents a range of challenges. Resource constraints

pose a significant hurdle (Fatima & Devindrappa, 2024), and the ground reality presents several challenges, especially for marginalized communities, financial barriers, digital infrastructure deficiencies, and inadequate language support are among the most significant access challenges they face (Mangat, 2024). Furthermore, there was a spike in problems caused by misperceptions, and understanding of its effects on poverty reduction.

The following table presents the trends in GER over the years, highlighting the gaps in achieving universal access to higher education.

Table 1: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) Trends in Higher Education (India)

Year	Overall, GER (%)	GER for SC (%)	GER for ST (%)	GER for Females (%)	GER for Rural Areas (%)
2015	24.3	19.1	14.2	23.2	18.5
2018	26.3	21.6	16.0	25.4	20.1
2020	27.1	23.4	18.0	27.3	21.5
2022	24.8	24.8	19.3	29.0	22.8

*This table highlights the GER trends and disparities among different social groups and regions

1) Digital Divide: A Major Barrier to Equity

Ensuring equity in education under NEP 2020 continues to be challenged by the digital divide. Even though the NEP 2020 is positioning technology as a major driver of learning, the contrast between rural and urban institutions in access to digital technologies and infrastructures is markedly stark.

- **Internet Access Disparities**: The 2021 report of Azim Premji University indicates that 60% of disadvantaged students could not access online education owing to the lack of devices and connectivity. The Ministry of Education (MoE) data (2021-22) indicates a 29% gap in internet access between rural and urban schools:

Table:2 Internet Access in Urban vs. Rural Schools

Area	Schools with Internet Access (%)
Urban	47.29%
Rural	18.47%

*This table shows that Only 18.47% of rural schools have internet access, compared to 47.29% in urban areas.

- **Digital Infrastructure Gap:** UDISE+ 2021-22 statistics illustrate that rural schools are behind urban schools in providing digital resources, for example, only 44.9 % of rural schools are with digital infrastructure as compared to 68.7 % in urban areas.

2) Financial Constraints and the Risk of Privatisation

NEP 2020 proposes self-supporting educational institutions, and it may stimulate the growth of privately owned schools and universities. This trend may put marginalized students at a disadvantage:

- **High Costs as a Barrier:** Rising tuition fees, especially in private institutions, make higher education inaccessible for marginalized students, with limited scholarships exacerbating the issue.
- **Privatisation Concerns:** Heavy reliance on private institutions leads to commercialisation, prioritizing profit over inclusivity.

3) Language Barriers and Regional Inequality

Language remains one of the significant barriers in achieving educational equity for many students, especially marginalized and rural students. Although the NEP has encouraged multilingual education, some challenges remain:

- **Struggles with Foundational Skills:** According to ASER 2023, 42% of rural students lack English comprehension skills, while 25% cannot read fluently a Standard II level text in their regional languages.

- **Regional Discrepancies**: Most students in tribal and rural areas struggle studying from a house language from which they do not speak, resulting in very high dropout rates and poor performance.
- **Financial Barriers:** Further privatisation of education increasingly makes the disparity in language and finance interlinked such that it becomes harder for vernacular students to access quality education.

4) Lack of Infrastructure in Rural and Tribal Areas

Rural territories of India constitute a great part of its population, and delivering quality education in those areas is very significant for national development and achieving socio-economic equality. However, rural education faces multifaceted challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socioeconomic disparities (Rana, 2024). The government schools, which provide education to poor children, lack adequate essential infrastructure.

- **Essential Facilities**: Inadequate classrooms, toilets, and insufficiently trained teachers seem to be persistent problems in most rural and tribal areas.
- **Budget Shortfalls:** In the 2025-26 Union Budget, an amount of ₹1.05 lakh crore will be allocated to education (around 2.5% of GDP), which is much lower than the NEP recommendation of 6% of GDP. This limits the money available for school infrastructure and teacher training, thereby compromising the very purpose of the policy equity.

5) Social and Caste Discrimination in Education

Castes affect the educational opportunities SC, ST, and OBC students get:

- **Discrimination within Classrooms:** A survey conducted by the Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network in 2023 stated that 35% of Dalit students stated they had experienced caste bias from teachers.
- **Dropout Crisis:** According to UDISE+ 2021-22, the dropout rates of SC (19.4%) and ST (24.1%) students really have caste bias against them. A report published by The Hindu quoted M. Geethanandhan, the state coordinator of Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS), who said illiteracy in the digital and IT field has also accounted for a high percentage of tribal student dropouts.
- **Barriers in Higher Education:** The 2022 Oxfam India study reported that 60% of Dalit and Adivasi students felt excluded in higher education institutions, such discrimination extending up to universities.

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Reality Check: Although NEP 2020 includes provisions for inclusion caste discrimination persists, and the lack of specific measures in the 2025 budget to address caste-based exclusion underscores the gap between policy and practice.

4. Intersectionality and education: the overlapping layers of exclusionists

In trying to ensure greater equity in education, NEP 2020 often ignores the intersectional nature of exclusion experienced by the disadvantaged. While discrimination does not act in a vacuum for the already disadvantaged individuals, discrimination across caste, class, gender, disability, geography, and other factors severely compounds the educational disadvantage. The investigation of these intersecting challenges would reveal the major loopholes in the implementation of policy and its ultimate impact on the ground.

1) Gender, Caste, and Economic Barriers to Education

- Most women and girls from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) must face man-made obstacles that iron them out from accessing education. Although there are affirmative actions, caste-wise discrimination, and poverty, combined with gender bias, are strong determinants against educational attainment.
- Dropout Rates and Early Marriage: According to the UDISE+ 2021-22, dropout figures for SC/ST girls are far beyond those of the upper castes. Pressures from society, monetary problem, and safety issues usually drive them out of education.
- Gender-Segregated Labor Expectations: Many girls from marginalized communities need to stay at home contributing unpaid labour and caregiving, which deprives them from formal education.

2) Disability and the Struggle for Inclusive Education

The NEP 2020 is for children with disabilities, and it talks about learning opportunities provided to them by the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan program. There exist systemic gaps that affect such learning opportunities. Some of them are:

- **Built environment deficit:** Disabled-friendly ramps, Braille textbooks, and sign-language interpreters are frequently missing from government schools.
- **Teacher Training Gap:** Teachers usually lack specialized teacher training to reach students with disabilities and thus fail to provide the necessary services to their diverse learners.
- **Linkage to Socio-Economic Status:** Children with disabilities, hailing from poor families, are doubly disadvantaged, in that even assistive technology and specialized education never tend to reach them.

3) Tribal and Rural Exclusion: The Land-Education Nexus

The NEP 2020 does not adequately address some unique challenges that tribal and rural communities are confronted with:

- **Displacement And Loss of Traditional Knowledge**: Many of the tribal communities are disrupted due to the development projects. This leads to the displacement of people from their habitats and, hence, into a stranger culture of education for their children. The policy encourages homogenisation or standardisation of curricula, often at the cost of indigenous knowledge systems.
- **Limited Access to Higher Education**: Institutions of higher education, in most cases, are lacking in tribal areas; students are forced to move to the urban areas for higher education, where they are often confronted with the barrier of language and culture.

4) Language and Cultural Identity in Education

Even though NEP 2020 supports education in regional languages, there remains various challenges:

- **Undermining Indigenous and Tribal Languages:** While languages from the region are promoted, tribal dialects have little or no access, hence virtually excluding indigenous students.
- **Preference for English in Higher Education:** Elite institutions continue to Favor the teaching of the medium in English, which would probably disadvantage non-English-speaking pupils.

5. Policy Recommendations

To ensure that the NEP 2020 maintains its promise of equity, targeted interventions are required to bridge policy and practice. The following recommendations can further strengthen its impact

1) Increase Public Investment in Education

- Increase education spending to 6% of GDP, as projected in NEP 2020, allowing the marginalised communities to be additionally supported.
- These should also include expansions of the above activities regarding financial assistance schemes (Scholarships/Grants) for SCs/STs/OBCs and economically weaker sections. Based on NEP-2020, the private sector should offer 20% free seats and 30% half-fee scholarships so that many poor but merit-based students get free or discounted-fee study opportunities. Such free education at the HE level will boost the GER of higher education in the country (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).
- Strengthening those regulations that will limit excessive privatisation and commercialisation of education. Develop programs for financial literacy targeting marginalized student populations and families at scaffolded levels of scholarship and loan opportunities. Extend other avenues of funding for research development to public institutions and reduce the dependence on private sector resources.

2) Improve Digital and Physical Infrastructure

- To unlock the digital world in rural areas with affordable internet services and enough distribution of digital devices for the disadvantaged.
- Improve the infrastructure of schools with good classrooms, accessibility to libraries, sanitation, and able teaching personnel.
- Establish community learning centers in distant regions to compensate for educational accessibility needs.

- Digital literacy programs for students and faculty members should be implemented to maximize the uptake of online education.
- Invest in solar energy or other renewable energy sources to ensure constant power supply for rural schools.

3) **Address Caste and Gender Discrimination**
- Cast strict anti-discrimination regulations in schools and higher education institutions for caste- as well as gender-based biases prevention.
- Facilitate female education by provision for hostels, transportation, security for SC/ST girls.
- Get more teachers and administrators from marginalized communities to build an inclusive learning environment.
- Establish mentorship programs that connect students from marginalized backgrounds with professionals in their fields.
- Strengthening grievance redress mechanisms for speedy redressal of discrimination complaints.

4) **Enhance Linguistic and Cultural Inclusion**
- Create curriculum frameworks that exhibit indigenous knowledge, local traditions, and history.
- Embed tribal and indigenous languages into school curricula-through texts, teacher training, and instructional materials.
- Launch language bridge support programs that will allow students to transition from their mother tongue to the languages of instruction.
- Advocate for bilingual education policies to close language gaps and ensure comprehension by rural students.
- Promote the representation of underrepresented cultures in textbooks and other learning materials.

5) **Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms**
- Set up independent monitoring bodies to include teachers or social activists and representatives from marginalized communities to evaluate the implementations of NEP 2020.
- Conduct regular appraisal and social audits to assess the impact of policies on lower caste groups.
- Promote community involvement and participation in school management to make local policies work best and to make sure they are put to practice.
- Increase policy transparency in implementation through publishing annual progress and challenges reports on NEP 2020.
- Use data-driven decision-making methods such as monitoring student performance and education outcomes focusing mainly on marginalized communities.

6) **Enhance Teacher Training and Capacity Building**
- Deliver knowledge enrichment to teachers on continuous professional development, emphasizing inclusive teaching.
- Establish incentives and career advancement opportunities for teachers who serve in rural and underserved areas.
- Reinforce teacher recruitment and training policies to ensure that regions marginalized will have enough teachers.

- Adapt innovative pedagogic practices which address the heterogeneous learning needs of learners.

7) **Expand Vocational and Skill-Based Education**
- Incorporate vocational training into the regular education system to offer students skills for employment.
- Collaborate with industries to develop the skill sets that are required in the market.
- Provide financial and infrastructural support for vocational training centers in rural and backward areas.
- Boost entrepreneurship training among students from marginalized communities.

8) **Develop Mental Health and Well-Being Support Systems**
- Establish mental health programs within schools and higher education institutions to enhance student wellness.
- Recruit trained counsellors and psychologists to provide support to students who are dealing with academic and social pressures.
- Raise awareness on mental health issues, targeting marginalized students facing socio-economic challenges.

9) **Promote Community and Parental Engagement**
- This can be achieved through conducting routine workshops and awareness-raising programs for parents.
- Motivate community-based initiatives that are developed to support students from remote and underprivileged areas.
- Create wider partnerships between schools and communities so that the educational resources and infrastructure are greatly improved.
- Establish parent-teacher associations advocating for inclusive and equitable education policies.

6. Conclusion

Indeed, NEP 2020 has the potential to revolutionize the education landscape of India, but actual implementation of the NEP policy would decide whether it really makes any difference. A truly fair education system does not just involve lofty reforms, but also the most rigorous implementation plans focused on marginalized communities. Continued strengthening of investments, elimination of systemic barriers, and promotion of inclusive learning environments will take the country closer to realizing the education equity enshrined in NEP 2020. Education is not an instrument for economic prosperity but a fundamental right against which the dignity and empowerment of everyone is upheld. It is the execution of NEP 2020, which will adjudge this policy's worth will ensure that policies deliver changes on the ground. It is necessary to bring into fruition the vision spells out in the policy that the government and its higher arms, educators, civil society, and the communities will jointly work. At the end of the day, a fair education system is the foundation of an equal society. It is education that provides us with the tools to use against the historical inequalities and build bridges for all, regardless of their socio-economic origin. If honest commitment is shown in the implementation of this policy, it will emerge as one of the most potent instruments for social

transformation, rearing a generation of empowered learners who would strive to achieve their best potential.

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