

Diversity and Inclusion for SC, ST & OBC in India: An Analytical Review under the Light of NEP 2020

Dr. Anjana Kumari¹,

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Abstract : The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 positions *equity and inclusion* as the foundation of India's educational transformation, emphasizing the upliftment of *Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)*—a category that encompasses *Scheduled Castes (SC)*, *Scheduled Tribes (ST)*, and *Other Backward Classes (OBC)*. This research presents a detailed policy-oriented review of the mechanisms through which NEP 2020 attempts to counteract caste-based inequalities in education. It synthesizes insights drawn from official policy documents, national education databases, implementation frameworks, and critical academic interpretations. Employing a *desk-based analytical approach* involving policy document evaluation and secondary data analysis (using UDISE+ and AISHE datasets), this study explores: (a) the principal policy provisions designed to reduce learning barriers for SC/ST/OBC learners—such as *Special Education Zones*, *SEDG support cells*, *targeted scholarships*, *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)*, and *mother-tongue-based instruction*; (b) the innovative strengths and progressive dimensions of NEP 2020; (c) persisting challenges related to implementation, particularly regarding *affirmative action*, *financial allocation*, *monitoring mechanisms*, and *the absence of caste-specific indicators*; and (d) policy-level recommendations to bridge these gaps. The analysis indicates that although NEP 2020 presents a forward-looking framework for inclusive education, the achievement of tangible, caste-sensitive outcomes will depend on: (i) the establishment of caste-disaggregated indicators and publicly accessible progress dashboards, (ii) assured and protected financial support for SEDG interventions, (iii) legal precision concerning reservation and equity measures within new institutional structures, and (iv) independent, transparent systems for monitoring and evaluation. The study concludes that the successful realization of NEP 2020's inclusive vision requires moving beyond aspirational commitments towards concrete, evidence-based improvements in *access*, *retention*, and *learning outcomes* for SC, ST, and OBC learners across school and higher education levels.

Key Sources: Government of India (NEP 2020 official document); UDISE+ national education reports; AISHE higher education statistics; NEP implementation strategy papers; and peer-reviewed as well as grey literature analyses (Ministry of Education).

Introduction: Educational inclusion is a cornerstone of social justice and democratic development. In India, caste-based disadvantage — historically entrenched in social, economic and political structures — continues to influence patterns of educational access, retention and learning. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents a major policy reorientation that foregrounds *equity and inclusion* and explicitly identifies Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) as among the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) that require targeted action. By recommending institutional mechanisms (Special Education Zones, SEDG cells), pedagogical reforms (foundational literacy and mother-tongue instruction), and financial interventions (scholarships and residential facilities), the NEP offers a broad framework for addressing caste-based educational gaps. However, policy intent alone is insufficient: measurable outcomes depend on implementation design, financing commitments, legislative clarity vis-à-vis reservation provisions, and monitoring systems that can capture caste disaggregated progress.

This research article critically examines NEP 2020's provisions for SC/ST/OBC inclusion, situating the policy in the context of recent national education data (school and higher education) and implementation documents. The aims are threefold: (1) map NEP's core instruments for caste-sensitive inclusion; (2) evaluate strengths and limitations in design and early implementation; and (3) provide concrete recommendations to strengthen delivery and accountability mechanisms so that NEP's rhetoric is converted into tangible improvement in the educational trajectories of SC/ST/OBC learners. The study is desk-based and relies primarily on official policy

¹ Anjana Kumari, Assistant Professor, Mundeshwari College for Teachers Education, Hathiakandh, Ushri, Khagaul Road, Sarari, Khagaul, Bihar 801105, India, E-mail Id: anjanak749@gmail.com, Mobile: +91-9835206708

documents and national data sources (UDISE+, AISHE) alongside recent policy-implementation analyses and scholarly critiques. ([Education Ministry](#))

Methodology: This research adopts a qualitative policy-analysis approach combined with secondary-data synthesis. The principal methods are: 1. **Policy-document analysis:** Close reading of NEP 2020 (official PDF) to identify explicit references, recommended mechanisms and language related to SEDGs, including Special Education Zones (SEZs), SEDG cells, scholarships, and pedagogical recommendations (ECCE, mother-tongue instruction). Implementation-related documents such as SARTHAQ and NIEPA implementation strategies were also reviewed for early operational guidance. ([Education Ministry](#)).

2. **Secondary-data review:** Examination of national education data sources — UDISE+/UDISE key results and All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) — to summarize baseline indicators on enrollment and trends for SC/ST/OBC students across school and higher education sectors. These data provide empirical context to assess the gap NEP aims to address. ([Education Ministry](#)).

3. **Literature synthesis:** Review of academic and grey literature analyzing NEP 2020's equity commitments and early critiques focusing on operational gaps (targeting, financing, monitoring). Selected peer-reviewed papers and policy commentaries (2020–2025) were used to triangulate interpretations. ([ResearchGate](#))

Limitations: The analysis is constrained by available published data (most recent UDISE+/AISHE years) and the evolving nature of NEP implementation; field-level primary data collection was beyond the scope of this review.

NEP 2020: Key Provisions Relevant to SC/ST/OBC: This section maps NEP 2020's principal measures that bear directly or indirectly on caste-based educational inclusion.

a. **SEDG framing and Special Education Zones (SEZs):** NEP 2020 introduces the concept of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) to cover a range of disadvantaged identities and circumstances, explicitly naming SC, ST and OBC among them. The policy recommends declaring “Special Education Zones” in regions with large concentrations of SEDG populations, to channel resources, tailor curricula and enhance local educational infrastructure. This geographically targeted approach aims to combine place based interventions with caste-sensitive outreach. ([Education Ministry](#))

b. **Institutional mechanisms: SEDG cells and governance levers:** NEP mandates the creation of SEDG cells within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and calls for institutional mechanisms (e.g., district and state-level coordination) to monitor and support inclusion. These cells are intended to identify barriers (economic, social, linguistic), help students access scholarships, remedial programs and grievance redressal. The design aims to mainstream inclusion within institutional governance rather than treating it as an add-on. ([Education Ministry](#))

c. **Financial support and scholarships:** NEP 2020 emphasizes scholarships, fee waivers and financial support to ensure access to higher education for disadvantaged students. It encourages convergence with existing schemes and proposes more coherent scholarship frameworks (and later policy documents have discussed “One Nation, One Scholarship”-type consolidation). Financial supports also include residential schooling (e.g., Ashram schools for tribal areas) and stipends that target out-of-school and out-of-reach learners. ([Education Ministry](#))

d. **Pedagogical reforms beneficial for marginalized communities:** NEP's pedagogical priorities—foundational literacy and numeracy, multilingual/mother-tongue instruction during early years, remedial teaching, and culturally responsive curricula—are expected to address key causes of early learning deficits among marginalized groups, including SC/ST and many OBC communities where regional languages and dialects dominate. The emphasis on bridging courses and contextualized pedagogy is a significant shift from one-size-fits-all approaches. ([Education Ministry](#))

e. **Continuity with Samagra Shiksha and system-level monitoring:** NEP envisages alignment with existing programs like Samagra Shiksha and recommends strengthening data systems (UDISE+/Performance Grading Index, etc.) to track progress. Implementation plans including SARTHAQ have started to translate NEP recommendations into operational tasks. However, the extent to which monitoring will be caste-disaggregated and public-facing is a critical implementation question. ([Education Ministry](#))

Baseline Evidence: Where are SC/ST/OBC in India's Education System?: To assess NEP's potential impact, it is necessary to summarize the existing distribution and trends.

a. **School education (UDISE+ snapshots):** UDISE+ and related syntheses show large-scale progress in universal access but persistent gaps in retention and quality. Aggregate school enrollment has shown fluctuations, with some recent years reporting declines (post-pandemic effects). Disaggregated coverage reveals continuing disparities in access and learning for marginalized

groups; while UDISE+ provides district-level data, public summaries often require careful analysis to extract caste-disaggregated trends. ([Education Ministry](#))

b. Higher education (AISHE): AISHE data indicate rising gross enrolment and absolute numbers for SC and ST students in higher education over the last

decade, but significant gaps remain in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), push into high-quality institutions, faculty representation, and completion rates. For instance, AISHE 2021–22 reported notable increases in absolute enrolments for SC students, yet systemic disparities in access to selective institutions persist. OBC representation shows sizable presence at aggregate levels but may mask intra-group heterogeneity and regional variation. ([S3WAAS](#))

c. What the data imply: The data paint a picture of partial progress: headline increases in absolute enrolments coexist with deep inequalities in quality, completion and learning outcomes. These inequalities are spatially uneven (rural/urban, state-by-state) and intersect with other disadvantages (gender, disability, linguistic minorities). NEP's targeted instruments (SEZs, SEDG cells, scholarships) are theoretically aligned to address these patterns; however, achieving measurable caste-sensitive improvements will require explicit disaggregation and targeted performance indicators. ([Education Ministry](#)).

Strengths and Innovations in NEP 2020 Relevant to Caste-Based Inclusion: This section highlights NEP's positive elements that could help improve outcomes for SC/ST/OBC students.

a. Holistic SEDG framing: NEP's SEDG lens broadens the understanding of disadvantage beyond income to include caste and social marginalization, migration and disability. This multi-dimensionality facilitates integrated interventions rather than narrow one-dimensional targeting. ([Education Ministry](#))

a. Place-based targeting via Special Education Zones: The SEZ concept allows for concentrated investments in regions with high concentrations of SC/ST/OBC populations—combining infrastructure, teacher training and contextual pedagogy—which is promising given the strong spatial clustering of caste-based disadvantage in many districts. ([Education for All in India](#))

b. Institutional mainstreaming of inclusion: SEDG cells in HEIs and mandated institutional responsibilities for outreach and redressal move inclusion from peripheral programmes to institutional governance structures—potentially improving responsiveness and continuity for disadvantaged students. ([Department of School Education](#))

c. Pedagogical emphasis on language and foundational learning: Early childhood focus, mother-tongue instruction and remedial measures directly tackle key early

d. barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized learners, offering the prospect of long-term learning gains when implemented effectively. ([Education Ministry](#))

Gaps, Risks and Operational Ambiguities (≈700–900 words): Despite strengths,

several critical gaps and risks could blunt NEP's caste-equity impact. **a. Ambiguity on affirmative action in new institutional architectures:** NEP is a policy, not a legal instrument; it does not (and cannot) supersede

constitutional reservation provisions. However, the document provides limited operational clarity on how reservation norms will be implemented across new institutional models (multidisciplinary universities, autonomous colleges, constituent institutions, and private-public partnerships). Without explicit rules, there is ambiguity about quota application for admissions, faculty recruitment, fellowships and contractual positions—areas where caste-based equitable access could be weakened if left unregulated. ([Education Ministry](#))

b. Financing and fiscal sustainability: Several NEP measures (SEZs, expanded residential facilities, large-scale scholarships and ECCE expansion) require significant recurring investments. Where state budgets are constrained or political will is lacking, implementation may be patchy. Past experience shows that continuity of centrally sponsored programmes like Samagra Shiksha depends on stable funding and state co-financing—both potential bottlenecks for caste-targeted measures. ([Education Ministry](#))

c. Monitoring, targets and caste-disaggregation: NEP recommends strengthened data systems but stops short of prescribing mandatory caste disaggregated public dashboards and time-bound KPIs for SC/ST/OBC outcomes. Without explicit targets and transparency, evaluating progress and holding agencies accountable will be difficult. This is especially problematic for identifying underperforming states/districts and allocating corrective resources. ([Education Ministry](#))

d. Risk of 'universalism' diluting caste-specific action: NEP's push for universal systemic reforms could, if implemented without explicit caste targeting, result in programs that disproportionately benefit better-off groups (urban, socially-advantaged)

— a classic “universalism without equity” risk. Universal measures must be supplemented by caste-sensitive affirmative action and proactive outreach to reach the most excluded. ([ResearchGate](#))

e. Implementation capacity and local adaptation: SEZs and SEDG cells require capable local administration, trained educators, and culturally sensitive curricula. Capacity constraints at district and block levels—especially in states with limited administrative bandwidth—could impair the nuanced implementation needed to reach SC/ST/OBC learners. ([NIEPA](#))

Policy Recommendations (Operational & Governance) (≈600–800 words): To

translate NEP’s ambitions into caste-sensitive outcomes, the following recommendations are proposed.

a. Mandate caste-disaggregated KPIs and public dashboards: Require that all SEDG indicators (enrolment, retention, learning outcomes, scholarship disbursement and completion rates) be disaggregated by caste (SC/ST/OBC), gender, and disability, and published annually at national, state and district levels. Tie a portion of central/state funding to demonstrable progress in these KPIs.

b. Ring-fence funding for SEDG measures: Create dedicated, audited budget lines in central and state education budgets for SEZs, residential facilities,

SEDG scholarships and community outreach. Prevent fungibility by mandating minimum expenditure norms and

independent audits. **c. Clarify affirmative-action operational rules for new institutional forms:** Issue clear regulatory guidance (or legislation if required) on how constitutional reservation norms apply to multidisciplinary universities, constituent colleges, autonomous schools and PPP arrangements—covering admissions, faculty hiring, fellowships and contractual posts.

d. Strengthen SEDG cells with enforcement and escalation powers: Equip institutional SEDG cells with resources, mandate periodic reviews, and establish escalation mechanisms to district/state grievance units and a national oversight body. SEDG cells should be staffed with trained social

mobility officers, ideally recruiting from SC/ST/OBC backgrounds. **e. Invest in community navigators and mother-tongue**

resources: Fund and train community navigators (local outreach workers drawn from disadvantaged communities) to assist families with admissions, scholarship applications and bridging programs. Prioritize development of mother-tongue instructional materials and remedial curricula for early grades in SEZs. **f. Independent evaluations and real-time learning:** Commission periodic independent evaluations (academic institutions/Third-Party Evaluators) focused on caste-disaggregated outcomes. Use rapid-cycle evaluations to iterate program design and scale effective practices across SEZs and institutions.

g. Capacity-building at district and block levels: The institute targeted capacity-building programs for district education officers, headteachers and local planners, emphasizing culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive classroom practices and data-driven monitoring.

These recommendations aim to convert NEP’s structural ideas into enforceable, measurable and locally responsive actions to reduce caste-based educational disadvantage.

Conclusion: NEP 2020 marks a significant policy inflexion by placing equity and inclusion at the heart of India’s education reform agenda and by explicitly recognizing SC, ST and OBC communities among SEDGs that warrant targeted interventions. The policy’s conceptual innovations—SEZs, SEDG cells, ECCE emphasis and mother-tongue instruction—create a credible framework for addressing multi-dimensional disadvantage. However, the policy’s success in reducing caste-based educational gaps ultimately depends on operational clarity (especially on affirmative action in new institutional architectures), sustained and ring-fenced financing, caste-disaggregated monitoring with public transparency, and strengthened local implementation capacity. Without these, NEP risks producing incremental rather than transformative gains for SC/ST/OBC learners. Policymakers must therefore prioritize explicit caste-sensitive targets, legal/operational certainty on reservation norms, and independent evaluations to ensure that NEP becomes an effective vehicle for substantive caste equity rather than remain an inspirational roadmap.

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