

National Education Policy 2020 and Tribal Education in India: Inclusion, Equity, and Indigenous Futures**Rajat Raj¹ & Dr. Subal Tandi²**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18164834>

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Abstract: Despite significant constitutional safeguards and policy interventions, tribal communities in India continue to experience persistent educational marginalization. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 positions itself as a transformative framework aimed at promoting equity, inclusion, and holistic learning; however, its implications for tribal education remain under-examined in scholarly discourse. This paper critically examines the role of NEP 2020 in addressing educational inequalities among Scheduled Tribes in India. Drawing on secondary data from Census reports, government policy documents, and peer-reviewed literature, the study adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach to assess the policy's commitments toward culturally responsive pedagogy, multilingual education, access, and skill development in tribal regions. The analysis reveals that while NEP 2020 introduces progressive measures such as mother-tongue-based instruction, flexible curricula, and enhanced institutional outreach, significant challenges persist in terms of implementation capacity, infrastructural deficits, linguistic homogenization, and the digital divide in tribal areas. The paper argues that without contextualized execution and active participation of tribal communities, policy intentions may fail to translate into substantive educational outcomes. The study contributes to broader debates on indigenous education, social inclusion, and sustainable development in the Global South.

Keyword: National Education Policy 2020; Tribal Education; Social Inclusion; Educational Equity; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; India

Introduction: Education has increasingly been recognized as a critical instrument for social inclusion, human capability expansion, and sustainable development, particularly among historically marginalized communities. Globally, indigenous and tribal populations continue to experience structural disadvantages in access to quality education due to historical exclusion, cultural marginalization, and policy neglect (UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2019). Achieving inclusive and equitable education, as emphasized under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), therefore necessitates education systems that are culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive, and socially just.

In India, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute one of the most educationally disadvantaged social groups despite extensive constitutional safeguards and targeted welfare policies. Scholars have consistently highlighted that tribal educational deprivation is rooted not merely in economic poverty but in deeper processes of social exclusion, spatial isolation, language barriers, and epistemic marginalization (Xaxa, 2014; Nambissan, 2010). The mismatch between formal schooling structures and indigenous ways of life has further contributed to high dropout

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rates, low learning outcomes, and limited participation of tribal communities in higher education (Béteille, 2008; Govinda, 2018).

The adoption of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant moment in India's educational reform trajectory. Positioned as a transformative policy framework, NEP 2020 seeks to address long-standing inequities by promoting holistic education, multilingualism, flexibility in curriculum design, and increased access to education for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Tribes (Government of India, 2020). The policy explicitly emphasizes mother-tongue-based instruction, integration of local knowledge systems, and the expansion of educational infrastructure in tribal-dominated regions.

However, while NEP 2020 articulates progressive commitments, critical scholarship on its implications for tribal education remains limited. Existing studies largely focus on policy intent rather than examining how these reforms intersect with entrenched structural constraints such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, digital exclusion, and the continued marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems (Kumar, 2021; Tilak, 2022). Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding the risk of cultural homogenization and the uneven capacity of states to implement culturally responsive educational reforms in tribal areas (Xaxa, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present paper critically examines the role of the National Education Policy 2020 in addressing educational inequalities among tribal communities in India. By situating NEP 2020 within broader debates on social inclusion, indigenous education, and educational sustainability, the study seeks to assess both the opportunities and limitations of the policy in transforming tribal educational outcomes. The paper argues that without contextualized implementation, community participation, and institutional accountability, the transformative potential of NEP 2020 may remain largely aspirational.

Theoretical Framework: The analysis of tribal education under the National Education Policy 2020 requires a theoretical lens that goes beyond policy description and engages with the deeper structures of inequality, culture, and power. Education does not function in a social vacuum; rather, it operates within historically produced relations of domination, exclusion, and cultural hierarchy. This study draws upon Social Exclusion Theory, Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital, Sen's Capability Approach, and perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge Systems to critically examine the promises and limitations of NEP 2020 for tribal communities in India.

Education and Social Exclusion: Social exclusion theory provides an important framework for understanding the persistent marginalization of Scheduled Tribes within the Indian education system. Exclusion, in this sense, is not limited to material deprivation but encompasses restricted access to institutions, decision-making processes, and culturally valued forms of knowledge. Tribal communities have historically remained outside the dominant structures of schooling due to spatial isolation, linguistic differences, and the imposition of a uniform educational model that prioritizes mainstream cultural norms. As scholars argue, exclusion is a relational process that systematically disadvantages certain groups while privileging others (Silver, 1994; Xaxa, 2014). From this perspective, educational inequality among tribal populations reflects long-standing patterns of structural exclusion rather than individual failure or lack of aspiration.

Cultural Capital and Educational Inequality: Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital further deepens the understanding of why tribal students often experience alienation within formal education. Cultural capital refers to the dominant cultural knowledge, language styles, and dispositions that schools implicitly reward. Tribal children, whose everyday knowledge systems, languages, and social practices differ from those of the dominant society, often enter schools with forms of cultural capital that are not institutionally recognized. As a result, education becomes a site of symbolic domination where indigenous knowledge is devalued and mainstream norms are treated as universal. Applying this framework helps explain why policies that focus solely on access and enrolment may fail to improve learning outcomes unless they also address cultural mismatch and epistemic exclusion.

Capability Approach and Educational Justice: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach shifts the focus from formal educational provision to the real freedoms individuals have to achieve valued outcomes. From this perspective, education is not merely about schooling or literacy but about expanding the capabilities of tribal individuals to live lives they have reason to value. Factors such as poverty, displacement, language barriers, gender inequality, and lack of infrastructure limit the ability of tribal children to convert educational opportunities into meaningful achievements. The Capability Approach is particularly relevant for evaluating NEP 2020, as it highlights the gap between policy intent and lived realities. Even progressive reforms may fall short if they do not enhance the actual capabilities of tribal learners in diverse social contexts.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Epistemic Justice: Indigenous Knowledge Systems offer an alternative epistemological lens for understanding education in tribal societies. Tribal communities possess rich bodies of knowledge related to ecology, agriculture, health, and social organization, developed through long-term interaction with their environments. However, formal education systems have historically marginalized these knowledge forms, treating them as inferior or irrelevant. Recent debates on epistemic justice emphasize the need to recognize indigenous knowledge as a legitimate and valuable component of education. NEP 2020's emphasis on local knowledge, multilingualism, and contextual learning can be examined through this lens to assess whether the policy genuinely challenges epistemic hierarchies or merely incorporates indigenous elements in a symbolic manner.

Integrating Theory with Policy Analysis: By combining these theoretical perspectives, the study situates NEP 2020 within broader sociological debates on inequality, culture, and justice. Social exclusion theory highlights structural barriers, cultural capital explains institutional bias, the capability approach foregrounds lived experiences, and indigenous knowledge systems emphasize epistemic recognition. Together, these frameworks enable a critical assessment of whether NEP 2020 has the potential to transform tribal education in substantive ways or whether it risks reproducing existing inequalities under the guise of reform.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine the implications of the National Education Policy 2020 for tribal education in India. The analysis is based on a critical reading of policy documents, census trends, and existing scholarly literature on tribal education, social exclusion, and educational inequality. A thematic method of analysis is used to identify key issues related to access, equity, language, cultural relevance, and implementation challenges in tribal regions. The policy is examined not merely as a formal

framework but as a socio-political text shaped by historical inequalities and institutional constraints. The interpretation is guided by sociological perspectives on social exclusion, cultural capital, capability expansion, and indigenous knowledge systems, allowing the study to assess the extent to which NEP 2020 addresses structural disadvantages faced by tribal communities. While the study does not rely on primary field data, it offers a theoretically informed and critical policy analysis aimed at understanding broader patterns and limitations in the pursuit of educational inclusion.

National Education Policy 2020 and Tribal Education: A Critical Analysis: The National Education Policy 2020 presents an ambitious vision of transforming India's education system by foregrounding equity, inclusion, and holistic learning. For tribal communities, the policy marks an important departure from earlier frameworks by explicitly acknowledging cultural diversity, linguistic plurality, and regional disadvantage. However, a closer examination reveals that while the policy articulates progressive intentions, its capacity to address the structural roots of tribal educational marginalization remains uneven and uncertain.

Access and Infrastructure: Persistent Structural Barriers: NEP 2020 emphasizes universal access to education through the expansion of schooling infrastructure, residential facilities, and digital learning platforms in disadvantaged regions. In tribal areas, however, educational access continues to be constrained by poor physical connectivity, inadequate school facilities, teacher shortages, and limited residential schooling options. Although the policy proposes strengthening school complexes and alternative learning models, it does not sufficiently account for the geographical dispersion of tribal settlements and the long-standing infrastructural neglect of Scheduled Areas. As a result, access remains uneven, particularly for girls and children from Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, for whom distance and safety concerns continue to limit sustained participation in schooling.

Language, Curriculum, and Cultural Relevance: One of the most significant contributions of NEP 2020 is its emphasis on mother-tongue or local-language instruction at the foundational stage. For tribal children, this has the potential to reduce early learning barriers and classroom alienation. However, the policy offers limited clarity on how tribal languages—many of which lack standardized scripts or trained teachers—will be institutionally supported. Without adequate investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and locally grounded pedagogical materials, multilingual education risks remaining a symbolic commitment rather than a transformative practice. Moreover, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the curriculum remains loosely defined, raising concerns that tribal cultures may be selectively represented rather than meaningfully integrated.

Equity, Inclusion, and Capability Expansion: NEP 2020 frames equity as a central principle and proposes targeted support mechanisms for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Tribes. From a capability perspective, however, equity cannot be reduced to enrolment or financial assistance alone. Tribal students often face layered disadvantages arising from poverty, displacement, nutritional insecurity, and social discrimination, which limit their ability to convert educational opportunities into meaningful outcomes. While the policy introduces academic flexibility and multiple learning pathways, it does not

adequately address the non-educational constraints that shape tribal learners' everyday realities. As a result, formal inclusion may coexist with substantive exclusion.

Digital Education and the Risk of New Exclusions: The policy's strong emphasis on digital education and educational technology reflects broader global shifts toward digitization. Yet, in tribal regions marked by limited electricity, poor internet connectivity, and low digital literacy, this shift carries the risk of producing new forms of exclusion. NEP 2020 acknowledges the digital divide but places considerable responsibility on states and local institutions to bridge it. In the absence of sustained public investment and community-based digital capacity building, technology-driven reforms may inadvertently widen educational inequalities rather than reduce them.

Institutional Capacity and Implementation Gaps: Perhaps the most critical limitation of NEP 2020 lies in the gap between policy vision and implementation capacity. Education is a concurrent subject in India, and the success of NEP 2020 depends heavily on state-level commitment, administrative efficiency, and local governance structures. Tribal education, in particular, requires coordination between education departments, tribal welfare institutions, and community organizations. The policy, however, provides limited guidance on mechanisms for tribal participation in decision-making or accountability frameworks to ensure culturally responsive implementation. Without such safeguards, the transformative potential of the policy remains contingent and uneven.

Conclusion: The National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant policy shift in India's effort to build a more inclusive and equitable education system. For tribal communities, the policy acknowledges long-standing educational disadvantages and articulates progressive commitments toward multilingual education, cultural relevance, and expanded access. However, the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that policy intent alone is insufficient to address the deeply rooted structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that continue to shape tribal educational exclusion.

Drawing on sociological perspectives of social exclusion, cultural capital, and capability expansion, the study highlights that educational inequality among tribal communities is not merely a question of access but one of recognition, relevance, and conversion of opportunities into meaningful outcomes. While NEP 2020 introduces important reforms, its effectiveness depends largely on context-sensitive implementation, sustained public investment, and the meaningful participation of tribal communities in educational planning and governance. Without addressing infrastructural deficits, language support systems, and digital inequalities, the policy risks reproducing existing hierarchies under the rhetoric of inclusion.

The findings also underscore the importance of epistemic justice in tribal education. Recognizing indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate and valuable forms of learning is essential for creating educational environments that are culturally affirming rather than alienating. In this regard, NEP 2020 offers a conceptual opening, but its transformative potential remains constrained by vague operational mechanisms and uneven institutional capacity across states.

The paper argues that the success of NEP 2020 in advancing tribal education lies not in its universal design but in its ability to adapt to local realities. Education policies aimed at marginalized communities must move beyond standardized solutions and engage with the social, cultural, and historical contexts of learning. Strengthening tribal education requires a shift from symbolic inclusion to substantive empowerment, where education functions as a means of expanding capabilities, preserving cultural identities, and enabling social mobility. Future research should complement policy analysis with grounded empirical studies to examine how NEP 2020 is experienced by tribal learners, educators, and communities across diverse regional settings.

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