

Equitable and inclusive vision in the National Educational Policy 2020: A Critique

- JIBRAN KHAN
- [NIRANJAN SAHOO](#)



Getty

- [INEQUITY](#)
- [NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020](#)
- [NEP](#)
- [NEW EDUCATION POLICY](#)
- [SEDG](#)
- [SEZ](#)

India has witnessed visible improvement in education especially with regard to education infrastructure and student's enrollment in the recent years. In particular, the Right to Education Act 2009 has [successfully](#) managed to increase enrolment in the upper primary level (Class 6-8). Nationally, between 2009– 2016 the number of students in the upper primary level increased by 19.4 percent. Implementation of schemes of sanitation and safety have also helped sustain this enrollment in the

country. The Census 2011 recorded literacy of women at 65.5 percent, for Muslims it had risen to 68.5 per cent and for Schedule Caste communities it had climbed to around 66 percent. Despite significant improvements in many crucial areas, Indian education systems continue to grapple with challenges of inequity and exclusion. Access to quality school education is still a dream for most rural population and the vulnerable and marginalized groups. This is even more acute in the [higher education](#) sector.

The National Educational Policy (NEP), 2020 attempts to address the growing inequality and inequity plaguing country's education system today. Among others, the NEP 2020 recognizes high dropout rates among socio-economic strata and vulnerable minorities. More importantly, there is recognition of barriers that lead to inefficient resource allocations such as small school campuses and causes for lesser participation of the girl child in rural areas. It also recognizes the unmet educational needs of children living in geographically difficult regions. The analysis piece takes a quick tour of key recommendations on inclusive education and records some of the key challenges that the NEP has to take head on.

Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

The NEP 2020 recognises that certain groups are grossly underrepresented in the existing educational systems. To specially address their educational needs, the NEP has clubbed gender identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities, and socio-economic conditions to create a new social group called SEDGs. The policy bases most of its objectives on creating inclusivity around these groups. As mentioned earlier, these groups have higher dropout rates due to a plethora of reasons, ranging from lack of accessibility for tribal communities (geographic) to historical exclusion of communities from systems of education for the socio-cultural identities categorization.

Recognising their special needs, the NEP 2020 recommends a series of policies and schemes such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers to incentivize

parents to send their children to school, providing bicycles for transport that have worked in the past to increase enrollment, to create more representation.

There are numerous challenges to this broad categorization, though. It is problematic as the policy does not recognize [caste as a historical inhibitor](#) and does not prescribe the need for reservations. Similarly, there is no acknowledgment of the multiple structural inhibitors that plague these communities from succeeding in educational institutions because of the constant discrimination that they face from multiple sources. Importantly, the policy does not acknowledge the [need for affirmative action](#) that is recognized as the bare minimum to give equal representation. There is no recognition of caste inclusion and affirmative action for teacher appointments either.

Recognition of gendered identities

The NEP 2020 recognises that female and transgender individuals across all the groups and socio-economic categories are the worst affected people. There are plans to implement schemes of giving out bicycles to form cycling groups and creating walking groups to schools to include community participation and make safety nets for these vulnerable students. Further, recognizing critical needs of education of the girl child, the new policy proposes the creation of a ‘Gender-Inclusion Fund’ to create better educational spaces for women and transgender individuals.

The fund will be accessible to states to create systems that will help the inclusion of these students. The fund will initiate provisions of sanitation, conditional cash transfers, bicycle distribution schemes, etc. Additionally, funds will also enable states to support and scale up effective community-based interventions that address local context-specific barriers to female and transgender children’s access to and participation in education. In this regard, the policy recommends establishment of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas to provide better boarding facilities for students to tackle geographical barriers to education.

Despite these innovative ideas and proposals, the NEP is far from addressing core issues of inclusivity and conversations that are missing in the existing schooling systems. Historically, school curriculums have remained silent on discrimination based on sexual identification and orientation of individuals and specific discrimination that [transgender individuals](#) face in workspaces. These individuals are not accorded the basic respect that citizens deserve, and even though there has been a judicial abolishment of Article 377, conversations around identity are still considered a taboo and have led to multiple cases of discrimination in the past against these individuals.

To illustrate, as per the recent CBSE press release, there were 1,889,878 candidates in class 10 and 1,206,893 candidates in class 12. Among the students who registered for class 10 exam, 7,88,195 were girls, 11,01,664 were boys, only 19 were transgender persons. For class 12, as many as 5,22,819 were girls, 6,84,068 were boys, and six were transgender persons. Thus the transgender individual is also the worst represented minority in our schooling systems.

The numerical disparity is a large enough indicator to show that barriers faced by transgender individuals are disproportionately high. The new policy does not outline how it plans to increase enrollment for these students, nor does it convey ways to solve discrimination that these individuals face once inside educational institutions that lead to disproportionately exacerbated dropout rates.

Recognition of individuals with special needs

The policy recognizes children with special needs and believes in incorporating them into the mainstream education systems. It broadly aligns with the objectives of The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016.

The policy also aims to recruit special educators in all school complexes to make sure that teaching is more inclusive and cognizant of the needs of children. Children with benchmark disabilities will be allowed to opt for homeschooling and would be provided with skilled homeschooling educators so that they can still learn and acquire

the best educational facilities. Further, teachers will be trained to identify learning disabilities in children early on and to help children with learning disabilities succeed in education and take care of their mental health. National Assessment Centre, PARAKH will be formulated to create equitable systems of assessment for children with learning disabilities. Alternate models for schooling are proposed to advance this objective.

However, the NEP appears to be over ambitious and utopian on this front. It fails to recognize the fact that not only most teachers are poorly trained for such special assignments, it also misses to take into account how most of India's schools are grossly [understaffed](#). The policy also doesn't clarify or elucidate how it plans to create alternative homeschooling mechanisms that are accessible to individuals.

For instance, in a [recent evaluation](#) undertaken by Delhi Child Rights Commission, as much as 60 percent of schools reported zero students with disabilities, and another 28 percent reported less than 1 percent. It highlights that people with disabilities are set to experience adverse socio-economic outcomes than persons without disabilities.

The new policy fails to specify a roadmap of how it will make sure that education is made accessible to these individuals. It also doesn't specify what the change in the curriculum would be to make sure that children with learning disabilities don't feel excluded in the extremely competitive environments that Indian schools operate in today.

Creation of Special Educational Zones

One of the standout recommendation of the NEP is the proposal to set up Special Educational Zones (SEZs) in regions with significant population belonging to Socio Economically Disadvantaged Groups and in those [aspirational districts](#). The key purpose is to spread education in the remotest and farthest places in India. This will be done by pumping extra resources and aligning multiple schemes and programmes of Centre and states to transform these backward regions.

While this idea is novel and holds promise to transform educational access in inaccessible areas of the country (such as urban ghettos with substantial minority

population), the policy hasn't specified what the criterion for these zones would be and how will they be distinguished in urban and rural landscapes. The policy has no clear indicator of what would be the determining factors.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020 has done well by loudly recognizing the challenges faced by gendered categories, minorities and children with special needs. It has also done well in terms of proposing a series of laudable steps including education SEZs to address the structural challenges of education in inaccessible regions. Yet, the new policy errs on multiple fronts. While it may have proposed a new category by clubbing many socio-economic groups for administrative efficiency and better allocation of resources, it does injustice to these historic categories such as Dalits and Adivasis. By doing this, it fails to acknowledge the unique sets of challenges faced by these groups. Similarly, its silence on affirmative action for certain categories can throw up multiple challenges at the time of implementation. To cut the long story short, the roadmap proposed to promote equity and inclusion for special categories is paved with potholes.