



A Step towards inclusive, equitable education: Special Education Zone (SEZ) recommended in NEP 2020

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Abstract:

Education is the greatest key factor for development of a nation by achieving desirable productive outcome. National policy plays a crucial role in developing an effective education system in the country by promoting human rights, social justice and equity. A group of people who are socially-economically-culturally marginalized and deprived (SEDGs) from the educational access needs more special intervention and an equitable inclusive education system and support for mainstreaming in a diversified country like India. Thus newly launched National Education Policy (NEP-2020) in India promises to eliminate the regional disparity in case of SEDGs by developing a region based uniform equitable inclusive education system in form of 'Special Education Zone' (SEZ) throughout the country in certain geographical areas and aspirational districts contain significantly large proportion of SEDGs, to uplift educational standard and community education development by providing extra support and concerted effort. This article aims to study the concept and aspects of proposed SEZ, explains the purpose and background in Indian context, evaluates its importance in educational development and promoting quality education and also discuss some possible hindrance such as lack of guidelines for selection of zones and some issues in its implementation though it is a novel and commendable initiative for promoting quality education in remote areas of the country and promises to transform educational landscape of backward regions.

Keywords: Socio Economically Deprived Groups (SEDG), Special Education Zone (SEZ), NEP 2020.

Introduction:

Education is the fundamental factor a society's up gradation, economic progress and promoting national development. Education policy plays a crucial role for making future responsible citizen and manpower building. The most important factors of a national policy are equity and social justice, developing an equitable inclusive educational system promotes a progressive bias free society conserving each citizen's own right and contributes positive productive input in nation building. From the time of constitution formation and later every government gave emphasis on ensuring right to educational access and opportunity; though there always

been educational disparity in case of backward and disadvantage groups of the country. Though there are several governments took place in past few decades, there was always a negligence in forming new National policies specially on most important sector i.e. Education sector Now the Indian government has taken new initiatives to bridging gender and social inequalities in all levels of school education in the new National Education Policy: 2020. SEZ(Special Education Zone) is one of them, by categorizing the disadvantage majority area, government plans to set up resource rich educational zones to eliminate the educational disparity and develop an equitable educational system. In this article the proposed SEZ and its prospects has been critically discussed.

Objectives of the study:

1. To highlight concept and aspects of SEZ in the light of National Education Policy 2020.
2. To explain purpose and background of developing SEZ introduced by NEP 2020 in Indian context.
3. To elaborate importance of SEZ in educational development in India.
4. To discuss the possible hindrances in implementing SEZ and suggestion for future prospects.

Concept and aspects of SEZ:

In simple words it can be inferred that Special Education Zone is a new concept in education which denotes recognizing and categorizing areas which have special need of educational development of socially economically backward and deprived group of people. It is an initiative of mainstreaming of marginalized people regionally who are discriminated from the educational facilities and need special intervention for upliftment of educational status to the national standards. In general SEZ is a neo-liberal concept of economics which denotes Special Economic Zones or areas in a country that are subject to different economic regulations than other regions by offering competitive infrastructure, duty free export, tax incentives and other measures to make it easier to conduct business. Similar concept can be found like Biodiversity hotspot in conservation Biology where in specific places are identified which needs urgent efforts to save biodiversity. Here similar kind of idea has taken into consideration for educational development in needed areas of the country.

- It is a regional concept to spread the education in all over the country especially in remote and inaccessible areas.
- It is a concept to provide extra support (by resources) for up gradation of education in backward regions of the country.
- It is a human right concept for ensuring equalization for educational rights of every student in the country.
- It is concept of eliminating educational disparity among different communities by providing educational access and quality education.
- It is a special intervention initiative for educational inclusion of deprived group of people.
- It is a collaborative effort by central and state government implementing schemes and policies to maximum for changing the educational landscape of marginalized areas.

Purpose for focusing in NEP 2020:

Education is the fundamental right of every citizens, every government has always a challenge to ensure an equitable accessible educational system for the upliftment of socially culturally economically backward deprived people. Since independence Indian government has taken sincere efforts for the educational development of backward class time to time according to their special needs whereas constitutional provisions, various 5-year plan developmental strategies, free compulsory education, common school system, mid-day meal scheme, free study material, Special scholarship for disadvantage group of people etc. Despite of these welfare strategies the bitter truth is these people are still backward in terms of education, socio-economic status and they are facing problems like poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy. In past few decades, government of India has taken educational policies in 1968, 1986, 1992 and several commissions have been initiated and in spite of these efforts, results are not satisfactory in case of backward group of people. It has been found that there are regional differences in educational accessibility, allocation of educational resources and educational output than highly developed regions. It is very important properly identify disadvantage group of people, allocate resources and equipment's to them, raising educational opportunities to increase enrolment in school education, arranging quality education in remote areas to ensure educational upliftment and up gradation of backward class society. For the first time in 2019 when Indian government plans to formulate educational policy after many years, regional difference in development of disadvantage group of people has been a crucial issues; thus zonal educational development concept comes on the board. This concept gives more emphasis on grassroots level educational development of backward class of the society. So government of India initiated a 'Special Education Zone' for the development in educational sector of disadvantage group of people in NEP (National Education Policy) 2020.

Indian scenario:

The concept of disadvantage group of people came from the time of ancient civilization; though the proper categorization of people has been done from the time of British period; they considered as 'depressed classes' of the society. Post-independence these people who are belongs from a rare racial-ethnic group from remote areas, socio-economically deprived, culturally lagged behind and doesn't have proper social status were grouped as Socially disadvantage group, now in NEP 2020 it has been termed as SEDGs(Socio-Economically Disadvantage groups). When the concept of 'equal human rights for all' started, the developmental issues of these people had been raised. As education is the most powerful instrument for the 'socio-economic empowerment', the educational developmental strategies have been taken by the government. In modern times various group identified facing discrimination in the society includes,- Schedule Caste(SC), Schedule Tribe(ST), Other Backward Classes(OBC), woman, transgender and minorities. These people cover almost 80% of the Indian population. As per census 2011, there are currently 166.6 million dalits(SC) in India making them about one-sixth of the Indian population; The tribal population of the country is 10.43 crores, constituting 8.6% of the total population, 89.97% of them live in rural areas and 10.03% live in urban areas (Source - www.censusindia.gov.in). Mandal Commission report of 1980 quoted OBC population at 52%, though National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) survey of 2006 quoted OBC population at 41%.As per Census

2011, India's population is 121.06 Cr with 48.5% female population. The census data, which was compiled in 2011, says India is home to 966.3 million Hindus, who make up 79.8% of the population. There are 172.2 million Muslims (14.2% of the population); 27.8 million Christians (2.3%) and 20.8 million Sikhs (1.7%). The data also shows there are 8.4 million Buddhists with a 0.7% share of the population and 4.5 million Jains, making up 0.4% of the population. In India, total population of transgender is around 4.88 Lakh as per 2011 census. As per Census 2011, in India, out of the 121 Cr population, about 2.68 Cr persons are 'disabled' which is 2.21% of the total population. In India, 20% of the disabled persons are having disability in movement, 19% are with disability in seeing, and another 19% are with disability in hearing. 8% has multiple disabilities. Other SEDGs categories are geographical identities (such as villages, small towns, and aspirational districts students) and socio-economic conditions (such as migrant communities, low income households, children in vulnerable situations, victims of or children of victims of trafficking, orphans including child beggars in urban areas, and the urban poor). If we consider the geographical concentration of these SEDGs across India, it shows that About 72 per cent of rural SC population reside in the seven states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal; while Punjab has highest (28.9%) SC population, Chandigarh is highest (17%) among UTIs. As far as STs are concerned, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and Rajasthan account for 70 per cent of the tribal population in rural India; while Mizoram has highest (94.5%) ST population and Lakshadweep (94.5%) is highest among UTIs. In case of women population, the idea of regional concentration can be considered by state wise sex-ratio, southern districts like Kerala, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh showing higher sex ratio, Kerala is highest (1084 female per 1000 male) among them; in UTIs Pondicherry, Lakshadweep and Andaman Nicobar Island have higher sex ratio and Pondicherry is highest (1038 female per 1000 male) among them. In case of minority population, Muslims population concentrates in states like Jammu and Kashmir, Lakshadweep, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal; while Buddhism concentration more found in the states like Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra etc; Sikh population mostly concentrated in Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Chandigarh; Jain population concentrated in Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan; Christian population more concentrated in states like Goa, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Kerala. While considering Persons with disability highest concentration found in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Rajasthan; while Uttar Pradesh is highest(15.5%) among them. In case of Transgender population they are mostly concentrated in states like Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh is highest (28.18%) among them. Due to this regional concentration of SEDGs government of India has taken some initiatives for the holistic development of these groups earlier such as MSDP project in minority based areas in the country. Multi Sectoral Development Plan conceived as an area development initiative to address the development deficit of minority concentrated areas by creating socio-economic infrastructure and providing basic amenities launched in the year 2008-09 in 90 Minority Concentration Districts (MCDs) by government of India. The projects had been taken up under MsDP was related to the provision of better infrastructure for education, skill development, health, sanitation, pucca housing, roads, drinking water and also schemes for creating income generating opportunities. Blocks were taken as planning units and blocks with a minimum of 25% minority

population falling in the backward districts on basis of parameters like literacy rate, work participation rate and basic amenities indicators adopted during 11th five year plan. It was a joint venture by both central and state government while a total of 710 such minority concentration blocks falling in 155 backward districts have been identified and government schemes have been implemented for the development of backward marginalized people. Later on after many discussion and research on these backward districts development it can be considered that education of marginalized people is needed to focus more with the infrastructural development. Not only minorities, all backward communities (social-economical-constitutional-religious-marginalized) should have been taken into the developmental consideration. Thus the government of India has taken the idea of SEZ as a continuation and upgradation of MSDP plan. This is a region or zone based educational development initiative to eliminate educational disparity among them. In the draft education policy proposed in 2019, the idea of SEZ comes in the front. As per proposal all government schemes and policies taken for SEDGs should be implemented to the maximum with concerned effort by joint funding by central and state government. There will be a clear definite area based on the social development and socio-economic indicators. Central government will spend extra investment and per child expenditure 2:1 will be spent by the state government. These targeted regions will have extra educational infrastructural facility, learning resources and teacher capacity to give quality and equitable education to the stakeholders. Also innovative educational initiatives be implemented and closely monitored based on outcome. Central and state government jointly will supervise and closely monitor these areas to bring out positive educational outcomes and upliftment of these backward regions. In minority based regions particular special actions (such as hiring community teachers from the minority groups or upgradation of institutes to national standards) will be taken to increase enrolment and educational outcome in these regions. Also all state government will form and execute a 10 year comprehensive plan for development of institutional architecture to enhance the access and quality of school education in these regions. Central government will remove obstacles in national operations to help state government such as newly established institutions should not depend on fees for more than 25% of expenses, student faculty ration should not exceed 30:1 in schools and 20:1 in HEIs in these zones. Other than that Ministry of Education and state department of Education will avail a fund at national level for providing scholarships to schools and higher education and also it would be spent on research on improving inclusion. So overall all targeted support and programs will be provided as per specific need of SEDGs in these regions. In the newly launched NEP-2020(National Education Policy 2020) by the Education ministry of Indian government it has been proposed that the regions have larger concentration of SEDGs and regions which needs special intervention for SEDGs educational development have been identified as aspirational districts. In these regions all national and state level schemes and policies would be implemented to the maximum by additional concerted efforts and fundings by joint venture of both governments. In these areas free boarding facilities as hostel will be provided of national standards like Jawhar Navodaya Vidyalayas. For the safe education of girls it has been stated that girl's hostel facilities will be provided by ensuring safe environment by female warden, security guards and boundary walls. Also to increase the participation in Quality schools(upto 12th grade) the Kasturba Gandhi balika Vidyalaya will be strengthened and expanded. To provide high quality school education throughout the country, additional Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas will be

established in remote areas and SEDGs needed areas. Preschool sections also be included in these vidyalayas to strengthen pre-primary education in these areas. For enhancing higher education access in these areas more number of high-quality HEIs would be builded in these zones. In recent time, state government of Gujrat proposed to establish a Gujrat Special Education Region (G-SER) at the Dholera Special Investment Region (DSIR), a Greenfield industrial city. It will be developed as an education hub with the potential to be developed in the future as a University district, school district and innovation district with public-private partnership. This state level initiative is quite different from the SEZ concept stated in NEP 2020, but it gives preliminary idea of SEZ. While considering different minority backward classes, recently Indian leading socio cultural organization 'Jamaat-e-Islami Hind' (JIH) has suggested setting of SEZ in Muslim concentrated areas across the country along with making proper arrangements for teaching of Urdu and Arabian languages which leads to open up more job opportunities in the gulf and Arabian countries. So overall it can be infered that by creating SEZs are government's aim to provide a holistic equitable quality education in every region of the country to eliminate regional educational discrimination and built equitable educational landscape across the nation.

Importance in educational development:

In NEP 2020 government of India proposed a lot of initiative to adress the problem of SEDGs. Among them creation of Special Education Zone is one of the unique and effective strategy for the development of educational system all over the country. These are the positive sides or importance we can consider,-

- This initiative basically based on the principle of 'equity', thus this will promote equitable education system to all students of the country irrespective of socio-economic barriers.
- This initiative aims to eliminate educational discrimination in different regions of the country, thus this will reduce the disparity faced by disadvantage group of communities.
- This initiative gives flexibility to the traditional institutions like madrasas and guru kul etc, thus it will help to increase enrolment of community students by conserving their own traditional values.
- This strategy includes children with disability to participate fully in regular schooling process from the foundational stage to higher education with proper support and accommodations in every region of the country.
- This initiative will adress the educational problems of remote areas of the country specially rural India, where every student has to travel a long for getting school education. This zones will erase this difficulties and make the education more accessible in rural remote areas.
- As This regions will have special intervention programs, it can be infered that the regions will be more effective in promoting quality school education for all.
- Women education will be more strengthen as these zone will have more educational development by increasing quality institutes like kasturaba gandhi balika vidyalayas.

- These zones will have optimal implementation of educational schemes by concerted collaborative efforts, thus the flow of resources and usage of fund will be more appropriate to bring holistic educational development in these areas.
- These zone will be developed in terms of inclusion and social justice, thus every individuals will be self-reliant and empowered that manpower development will ensure nation' progress.

Possible Hinderances:

- In new national education policy, many of the initiatives taken for disadvantage group of people, SEZ in one of them. Though it has been taken with broad vision and keeping the aim in educational development, there are some issues which not had been addressed and needs to be discussed,-
- The major complexity in the proposed initiative can be figure out by the identification of SEDG groups. In the new policy all the socio-economically disadvantage group of people added in a single category with disability and geographical identities which may create a complexity in identifying the stakeholders. Women and disabled persons are distributed all over the country, it's may be difficult to find proper targeted areas. It is thinkable that a policy of education of the country disregards the constitutional categories and ignores the differences which exist in these marginalised groups which constitute more than 80% of India's population.
- The most important thing lacks in setting SEZ is it's criteria, there are no proper guidelines has been mentioned how these areas will be selected, will function, what institutions will be builded for the beneficiaries in new education policy.
- According to the new education policy, there will be a segregation in normal school education system and teacher education between SEZ and Non-SEZ areas. There will be special certification teaching course, community led volunteering, peer tutoring in SEZ areas which is quiet different from the 4 year integrated model. Thus there will be a differentiation from educational system of all over country.
- This SEZ areas will focus more on disadvantage group of people and there will be special initiatives for them, which may increase more disparity in terms of against of inclusive society. No common school approaches are there, thus it can increase educational marginalisation in this areas.
- In this initiative there are no clear thought about categorization of this places according to the different categories of disadvantage people. A area may have only one group of minorities but lacks the others, so there how the SEZ process will be organised, there is no indication in new policy.
- For this initiative no such ground realities of educational landscape have been checked in a deeply divided society like India. There are lack of social development and violence in remote areas of the country and educational accessibility and quality are the major issues in rural areas. So without addressing this developmental issues no SEZ can be successful.
- India is a federal country and education is in the concurrent list in the Constitution. By bringing these areas under central authorities is a major threat to constitutional structure of the country. There have been no such discussions on SEZ with all states of the country with central government. Then major

control of central authorities in these areas may bring out conflicts between central and state government.

- In SEZ areas, as child with special needs are clubbed with other disadvantage groups, they may have to compete with SEDGs in terms of reservation in schools and priorities. This defeats the aim of inclusive education in the policy.
- This initiative promises to provide educational access in inaccessible areas of the country(such a urban ghettos with substantial minority population), but how these areas will be determined distinguishing urban and rural landscape is not specified in the policy. There are also rurban areas or urban outscars where it can be difficult to find the needed area.
- As per the policy this zones will be based on SEDGs needed areas, but there are many areas which have a vast historical cultural background like Dalits or Adivasi community areas. In this policy all socio-economically categories are merged in a single one, thus there are no special plans have been declared for those areas earlier mentioned. There may be challenges in time of implementation of schemes in those areas.
- There are no indication of time bound or time limit to build these areas and which schemes will be allotted and implemented there. As per need of SEDGs government schemes should have been included in the policy in regard to SEZ areas.
- These initiative involves CWSN (Divvyang) and transgender (kinnar and others) group of people, but in india there are no such zones concentring these category of population, only Social disadvantage and minority groups can be targeted regionally like MSDP initiative. So zone wise development of these group of people are quite challenging.
- This initiative lacks a preliminary plan for implementation. There are some past instances which reflect that land acquisition for developing these kinds of special regions is quite troublesome for the government. Due to land acquisition for development of ‘Science Cluster and research hub’ in Challakere districts of Karnataka destroys local livestock and local inhabitants are condemned migrating to other places. Thus government must prepare a regional development plan for SEZs conserving local livelihood, culture and tradition besides of educational development

Some Suggestions:

In NEP 2020, government of india has taken creation of SEZs as an affirmative initiative to address the problems of socio-economically deprived people with special emphasis on minorities, disabled and marginalized people. Though there are some challenges need to address before implementation of this; the suggestions have been given for the betterment of this proposed initiative in terms of its prospects in future,-

- Government of India should consider the educational necessities of different categories of SEDGs in concentrated areas. Proper educational access, actions to increase enrolment and ensuring quality education according to different categories must be the main concern in those areas.

- By clubbing all disadvantage group of people in one category it may be problematic for government to implement government schemes and policies in SEZ areas. There are difference in regional distribution between minorities and divvyang people or between urban and rural poor. So differentiating these categories and putting equal importance for educational development each group of people for implementing this scheme are necessary.
- Most important thing of regional development of education is it's criteria and delimitations. Government of India has not declared any kind of guidelines, criteria or measures for recognizing these areas. Besides of announcement of this initiatives, a proper comprehensive guidelines should have been provided.
- As SEZs are a collaborative development zones of disadvantage groups, there must be a comprehensive ground survey on historically , constitutionally and culturally defined groups. Other wise there will be challenges for scheme implementation.
- Rural backwardness is a major issue in developing country like India. Therefore before developing SEZs in the country, most of the rural and remote areas should be developed. Such development will help to increase the educational excellence in those areas.
- In erasing regional backwardness it is very necessary to take a bottom-up approach. While developing of SEZs government can take block and districts as developing units rather than large areas. This grassroots development policy can be effective to eliminate regional educational backwardness.
- While developing SEZs criterias, government should merge educational socio-economic criterias with regional criterias. The zones which require special interventions should consider literacy rate, female literacy rate, income level, work participation rate, basic amenities indicators with regional concentration of disadvantage groups.
- In proposed policy there will be a sperate specific educational system in SEZ areas than Non-SEZ areas, which may increase more discrimination and differentiations. Thus concepts like common school, inclusive school must be encouraged to defeat this educational segregation.
- There should be clarity in defining roles, appointment, budget, time limit and so on in SEZ areas. Thus government of india must include private managements, special educators, social workers, NGOs, councillors in bridging various social inclusion educational gap in different needed sectors.
- In this initiative there must be a comprehensive development plan including issues like minority development, skill-based learning, vocational training, girl child safety, inclusive assistive measures for CWSN, self-help group for transgenders, slum education programs, Local heritage based education etc to eliminate regional educational discrimination og SEDGs to increase educational participation and outcome in SEZ areas.

Conclusion:

The new National Education Policy brings new lights to the educational development of backward regions of the country by its proposals. Development of Special Education Zones is one of the remarkable initiatives which recognize the challenges faced by gender categories, socio-economically marginalized, minorities and children with special needs for a long time. This strategy by the government of India is to address the structural challenges in inaccessible regions of the country. Yet this strategy lacks proper planning and affirmative action for the implementation in a diversified country like India. It also fails to acknowledge the root problems of educational inequality and discrimination in the remote areas of the country rather suggests proposal which are challenging to existing school education system in present socio-economic context of the country. Government needs to build up basic development of backward regions and then should focus on upliftment of educational system to national standards. Despite bringing ghettoization and separatism, national policy of education could focus more on Indian diversified unity and cultural coherence. Thus it is recommended to develop an equitable inclusive quality education system for all across the country to bring India successfully in global educational landscape.

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