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National Education Policy 2020 Equitable and Inclusive Education: Learning for All

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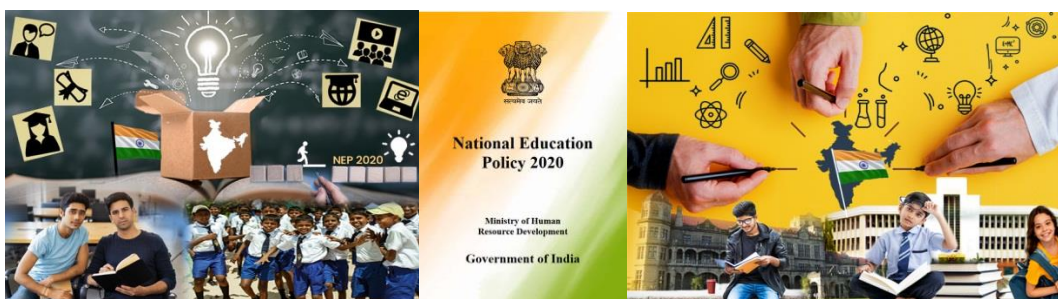
Abstract: The year 2020 has been an exceptional year for countries across the globe. In India, apart from Covid-19, one of the important changes that took place was the development of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Time by time, various committees have recommended to increase the allocation of the budget for education to 6% of the GDP, and this has led to the interests of researchers.

This paper aims to identify the concerns and focus of NEP 2020. NEP-2020 is an innovative and futuristic proposal with both positive and contentious aspects, framed with the objective to provide a quality school education and higher education to everyone with an expectation of holistic & research-oriented progress.

This paper initially depicts an overview of NEP-2020, distinguishing the strengths & weakness of the policy at higher education & research levels, evaluation of the implementation suggestions given in the policy, identifying and analyzing possible generic strategies for implementation of NEP-2020 to fulfill its objectives based on focus group discussions.

The paper also includes many predictive proposals on issues like developing quality universities & colleges, institutional restructuring & consolidation, more holistic & multidisciplinary education, optimal learning environment & student support, transforming the regulatory system of higher education, technology usage & integration, and online & digital education. Finally, some recommendations are made to implement the NEP2020 effectively irrespective of various constraints.

Keywords: Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), female and transgender individuals), socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities and socio-economic conditions.



Salient features of equitable and inclusive education:

Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality. Inclusive and equitable education - while indeed an essential goal in its own right - is also critical to achieving an inclusive and equitable society in which every citizen has the opportunity to dream, thrive, and contribute to the nation. The education system must aim to benefit India's children so that no child loses any opportunity to learn and excel because of circumstances of birth or background.

This policy reaffirms that bridging the social category gaps in accessing, participation, and achieving learning outcomes in school education will continue to be one of the major goals of all educational sector development programmers.

“Literacy education should follow the education of the hand, followed by heart and head, the one gift that visibly distinguishes man from beast, an edict championed by Mahatma Gandhi”

Equitable education for disadvantaged castes:

According to U-DISE 2016-17 data, about 19.6% of students belong to Scheduled Castes at the primary level, but this fraction falls to 17.3% at the higher secondary level. These enrolment drop offs are more severe for Scheduled Tribes students (10.6% to 6.8%), and differently-abled children (1.1% to 0.25%), with even greater declines for female students within each of these categories. The decline in enrolment in higher education is even steeper.

A multiplicity of factors, including lack of access to quality schools, poverty, social mores & customs, and language have had a detrimental effect on rates of enrolment and retention among the Scheduled Castes. Bridging these gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes of children belonging to Scheduled Castes will continue to be one of the major goals. Also, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) which have been identified on the basis of historically being socially and educationally backward also need special focus.

Tribal communities and children from Scheduled Tribes also face disadvantages at multiple levels due to various historical and geographical factors. Children from tribal communities often find their school education irrelevant and foreign to their lives, both culturally and academically. While several programmatic interventions to uplift children from tribal communities are currently in place, and will continue to be pursued, special mechanisms need to be made to ensure that children belonging to tribal communities receive the benefits of these interventions.

Equitable education of minorities:

Minorities are also relatively under-represented in school and higher education. The Policy acknowledges the importance of interventions to promote education of children belonging to all minority communities, and particularly those communities that are educationally under-represented.

Equitable education for Children with special needs:

The Policy also recognizes the importance of creating enabling mechanisms for providing Children with Special Needs (CWSN) or Divyang, the same opportunities of obtaining quality education as any other child.

There have been various successful policies and schemes such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers to incentivize parents to send their children to school, providing bicycles for transport, etc., that have significantly increased participation of SEDGs in the schooling system in certain areas. These successful policies and schemes must be significantly strengthened across the country.

It will also be essential to take into account research that ascertains which measures are particularly effective for certain SEDGs. For example, providing bicycles and organizing cycling and walking groups to provide access to school have been shown to be particularly powerful methods in increasing participation of female students - even at lesser distances - because of the safety benefits and comfort to parents that they provide.

One-on-one teachers and tutors, peer tutoring, open schooling, appropriate infrastructure, and suitable technological interventions to ensure access can be particularly effective for certain children with disabilities. Schools providing quality ECCE reap the greatest dividends for children who come from families that are economically disadvantaged. Meanwhile, counselors and/or well-trained social workers

that work with and connect with students, parents, schools, and teachers in order to improve attendance and learning outcomes have been found to be especially effective for children in urban poor areas.

Special education zones:

Data shows that certain geographical areas contain significantly larger proportions of SEDGs. Also, there are geographical locations that have been identified as Aspirational Districts which require special interventions for promoting their educational development. Hence, it is recommended that regions of the country with large populations from educationally-disadvantaged SEDGs should be declared Special Education Zones (SEZs), where all the schemes and policies are implemented to the maximum through additional concerted efforts, in order to truly change their educational landscape.

Equitable education for women:

It must be noted that women cut across all underrepresented groups, making up about half of all SEDGs. Unfortunately, the exclusion and inequity that SEDGs face is only amplified for the women in these SEDGs. The policy additionally recognizes the special and critical role that women play in society and in shaping social mores; therefore, providing a quality education to girls is the best way to increase the education levels for these SEDGs, not just in the present but also in future generations. The policy thus recommends that the policies and schemes designed to include students from SEDGs should be especially targeted towards girls in these SEDGs.

In addition, the Government of India will constitute a 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' to build the nation's capacity to provide equitable quality education for all girls as well as transgender students. The fund will be available to States to implement priorities determined by the Central government critical for assisting female and transgender children in gaining access to education (such as the provisions of sanitation and toilets, bicycles, conditional cash transfers, etc.); funds will also enable States to support and scale effective community-based interventions that address local context specific barriers to female and transgender children's access to and participation in education. Similar 'Inclusion Fund' schemes shall also be developed to address analogous access issues for other SEDGs. In essence, this Policy aims to eliminate any remaining disparity in access to education (including vocational education) for children from any gender or other socio-economically disadvantaged group.

Expansion of Kendriya Vidyalayas and other standard institutions:

Free boarding facilities will be built - matching the standard of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas - in school locations where students may have to come from far, and particularly for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with suitable arrangements for the safety of all children, especially girls. Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas will be strengthened and expanded to increase the participation in quality schools (up to Grade 12) of girls from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Additional Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kendriya Vidyalayas will be built around the country, especially in aspirational districts, Special Education Zones, and other disadvantaged areas, to increase high-quality educational opportunities. Pre-school sections covering at least one year of early childhood care and education will be added to Kendriya Vidyalayas and other primary schools around the nation, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Special considerations for children with disabilities:

Ensuring the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in ECCE and the schooling system will also be accorded the highest priority. Children with disabilities will be enabled to fully participate in the regular schooling process from the Foundational Stage to higher education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 defines inclusive education as a 'system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities'. This Policy is in complete consonance with the provisions of the RPWD Act 2016 and endorses all its recommendations with regard to

school education. While preparing the National Curriculum Framework, NCERT will ensure that consultations are held with expert bodies such as National Institutes of DEPwD.

To this end, schools/school complexes will be provided resources for the integration of children with disabilities, recruitment of special educators with cross-disability training, and for the establishment of resource centers, wherever needed, especially for children with severe or multiple disabilities. Barrier free access for all children with disabilities will be enabled as per the RPWD Act. Different categories of children with disabilities have differing needs. Schools and school complexes will work and be supported for providing all children with disabilities accommodations and support mechanisms tailored to suit their needs and to ensure their full participation and inclusion in the classroom. In particular, assistive devices and appropriate technology-based tools, as well as adequate and language-appropriate teaching-learning materials (e.g., textbooks in accessible formats such as large print and Braille) will be made available to help children with disabilities integrate more easily into classrooms and engage with teachers and their peers. This will apply to all school activities including arts, sports, and vocational education. NIOS will develop high-quality modules to teach Indian Sign Language, and to teach other basic subjects using Indian Sign Language. Adequate attention will be paid to the safety and security of children with disabilities.

As per the RPWD Act 2016, children with benchmark disabilities shall have the choice of regular or special schooling. Resource centers in conjunction with special educators will support the rehabilitation and educational needs of learners with severe or multiple disabilities and will assist parents/guardians in achieving high-quality home schooling and skilling for such students as needed. Home-based education will continue to be a choice available for children with severe and profound disabilities who are unable to go to schools. The children under home-based education must be treated as equal to any other child in the general system. There shall be an audit of home-based education for its efficiency and effectiveness using the principle of equity and equality of opportunity. Guidelines and standards for home-based schooling shall be developed based on this audit in line with the RPWD Act 2016. While it is clear that the education of all children with disabilities is the responsibility of the State, technology-based solutions will be used for the orientation of parents/caregivers along with wide-scale dissemination of learning materials to enable parents/caregivers to actively support their children's learning needs will be accorded priority.

Most classrooms have children with specific learning disabilities who need continuous support. Research is clear that the earlier such support begins, the better the chances of progress. Teachers must be helped to identify such learning disabilities early and plan specifically for their mitigation. Specific actions will include the use of appropriate technology allowing and enabling children to work at their own pace, with flexible curricula to leverage each child's strengths, and creating an ecosystem for appropriate assessment and certification. Assessment and certification agencies, including the proposed new National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, will formulate guidelines and recommend appropriate tools for conducting such assessment, from the foundational stage to higher education (including for entrance exams), in order to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all students with learning disabilities.

The awareness and knowledge of how to teach children with specific disabilities (including learning disabilities) will be an integral part of all teacher education programmes, along with gender sensitization and sensitization towards all underrepresented groups in order to reverse their underrepresentation.

Encouragement of alternative forms of schools:

Alternative forms of schools will be encouraged to preserve their traditions or alternative pedagogical styles. At the same time, they will be supported to integrate the subject and learning areas prescribed by the NCFSE into their curricula in order to reduce and eventually eliminate the underrepresentation of children from these schools in higher education. In particular, financial assistance will be provided to introduce science, mathematics, social studies, Hindi, English, State languages, or other relevant subjects in the curriculum, as may be desired by these schools. This would enable children studying in these schools to attain the learning outcomes defined for Grades 1–12. Furthermore, students in such schools would be encouraged to appear for State or other Board examinations and assessments by the NTA, and thereby enroll in higher education institutions. Capacities of teachers in the teaching of science, mathematics, language, and social studies will be developed including orientation to new pedagogical practices. Libraries and laboratories will be strengthened and adequate reading materials like books, journals, etc., and other teaching-learning materials will be made available.

Other important features:

Within SEDGs, and with respect to all the above policy points, special attention will be given to reduce the disparities in the educational development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. As a part of the efforts to enhance participation in school education, special hostels in dedicated regions, bridge courses, and financial assistance through fee waivers and scholarships will be offered to talented and meritorious students from all SEDGs on a larger scale, especially at the secondary stage of education, to facilitate their entry into higher education.

Under the aegis of the Ministry of Defense, State Governments may encourage opening NCC wings in their secondary and higher secondary schools, including those located in tribal dominated areas. This will enable harnessing of the natural talent and unique potential of students, which in turn would help them to aspire to a successful career in the defense forces.

The NEP has infused the aspects of disability inclusion throughout the policy document with a dedicated chapter on equitable and inclusive education, focusing on issues, challenges and recommendations for bridging the gaps reducing the disparities in access and participation of all learners.

All scholarships and other opportunities and schemes available to students from SEDGs will be coordinated and announced by a single agency and website to ensure that all students are aware of, and may apply in a simplified manner on such a 'single window system', as per eligibility.

Challenges in implementing the salient features for equitable and inclusive education:

All the above policies and measures are absolutely critical to attaining full inclusion and equity for all SEDGs - but they are not sufficient. What is also required is a change in school culture.

All participants in the school education system, including teachers, principals, administrators, counselors, and students, will be sensitized to the requirements of all students, the notions of inclusion and equity, and the respect, dignity, and privacy of all persons. Such an educational culture will provide the best pathway to help students become empowered individuals who, in turn, will enable society to transform into one that is responsible towards its most vulnerable citizens.

Inclusion and equity will become a key aspect of teacher education (and training for all leadership, administrative, and other positions in schools); efforts will be made to recruit more high-quality teachers and leaders from SEDGs in order to bring in excellent role models for all students.

Need for an Inclusive curriculum and ways to bring it about:

Learning is a process of adaptation to environmental stimuli, involving successive periods of what Piaget called assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration. In assimilating knowledge, students incorporate their experiences and observations into the logic of their existing or developing understandings.

For example, children might understand the phenomena of the life cycle of a butterfly in terms of their understanding of the human life cycle. Accommodation occurs when there is a conflict or mismatch between new information and the students' internal models, leading students to adapt their existing understandings and expectations to incorporate their new perceptions and experiences.

Students will be sensitized through this new school culture, brought in by teachers, trained social workers and counselors as well as through corresponding changes to bring in an inclusive school curriculum.

The school curriculum will include, early on, material on human values such as respect for all persons, empathy, tolerance, human rights, gender equality, non-violence, global citizenship, inclusion, and equity.

It would also include more detailed knowledge of various cultures, religions, languages, gender identities, etc. to sensitize and develop respect for diversity. Any biases and stereotypes in school curriculum will be removed, and more material will be included that is relevant and relatable to all communities.

Disabilities impact access to opportunities for learning and achievement of a learner's full potential. It is therefore imperative to design a flexible education system that caters to the individual needs and abilities of CwSN. Equitable, inclusive and quality education identifies and attempts to eliminate barriers, promotes a sense of belonging lays the foundation for success and better learning outcomes for all learners.

Conclusion:

In this study, the researcher reviewed The Coleman Report and summarized historical insights of the past researches and the No Child Left Behind policy between the U.S. and China that also give out the new concepts and solutions for authorities to improve equality of educational opportunity. The new concepts integrated the modern key factors of equality "function", "capability", and UNESCO learning support props for carrying the lifelong skills. Reviewing the Plan from the Chinese version of No Child Left Behind the researcher gave out four specific strategies which reflected from the drawbacks of the Plan, discovered from the teaching site, and review from experienced teaching faculties at schools. For further studies, follow up the solutions to meet the needs of rural area children and family in order to apply at a designated area as an empirical experiment as a blueprint for national wide policy making references.

Currently, the awareness of equality of educational opportunity has been rising up in modern education reform. It plays an important role in civilization, economic development and reaches the goal of homonymous society. It is the duty of the government.

To implement the salient features, with strict visionary dedication, proper in-depth training, focus on inclusive education with far greater sensitivity in such an extremely diverse culture like ours, top to bottom encouragement and freedom, regular monitoring by dedicated leaders in the social work sector, and above all, a greater MOVEMENT to bring about a NEW INDIA, that can actually showcase to the world, what can be done and must be done, ARE THE REAL CHALLENGES AHEAD TO MAKE THE NEP A REALITY FROM PAPER TO GROUND.

This requires ALL too actively and passionately involve and with great compassion and dedication TO do one's total best and make the above a reality.

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