

NEP 2020: A Transformative Step Toward Equity and Inclusion in Education

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ABSTRACT

The Indian education system is directed by significant constitutional provisions based on accessible quality education. The Preamble of the Indian Constitution upholds the ideal of impartial learning, the Fundamental Rights secure equal access for marginalized communities, and the Directive Principles of State Policy mandate free and compulsory education for all children. Aligned with this constitutional vision, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to bridge inequalities and integrate every learner into the mainstream education system. Equity and inclusion in education are crucial for ensuring that every individual has access to quality learning opportunities, regardless of their socioeconomic background, abilities, and personal circumstances. Equity is about ensuring fair and equal opportunities for growth while addressing every concern, whereas inclusion signifies the acceptance and celebration of human diversity. This research paper aims to highlight the key provisions of equity and inclusion outlined in this policy, identify major challenges to inclusion, and offer some key strategies for optimizing the policy's impact in fostering a more equitable and inclusive education system. The role of policymakers, teachers, and institutions in fostering equitable and inclusive environments is discussed, with an emphasis on the importance of addressing disparities in resources, support systems, and learning environments. By adopting inclusive practices, the Education system can promote social mobility and contribute to a more inclusive society.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Equity and Inclusion, Digital Divide, UNESCO, Marginalised Groups, Stakeholders

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is the first comprehensive policy that emphasizes equity and inclusion, aiming to make India a “global knowledge superpower” (Rai, 2022). It is a milestone in the history of the Indian education system. The policy emphasized that a good educational institution is one where every student, regardless of their differences, feels welcome and supported in a safe and cooperative learning environment. This environment is characterized by proper infrastructure and resources that are equally available to all students, fostering a conducive learning atmosphere. Education should serve as a catalyst for social justice and equality,

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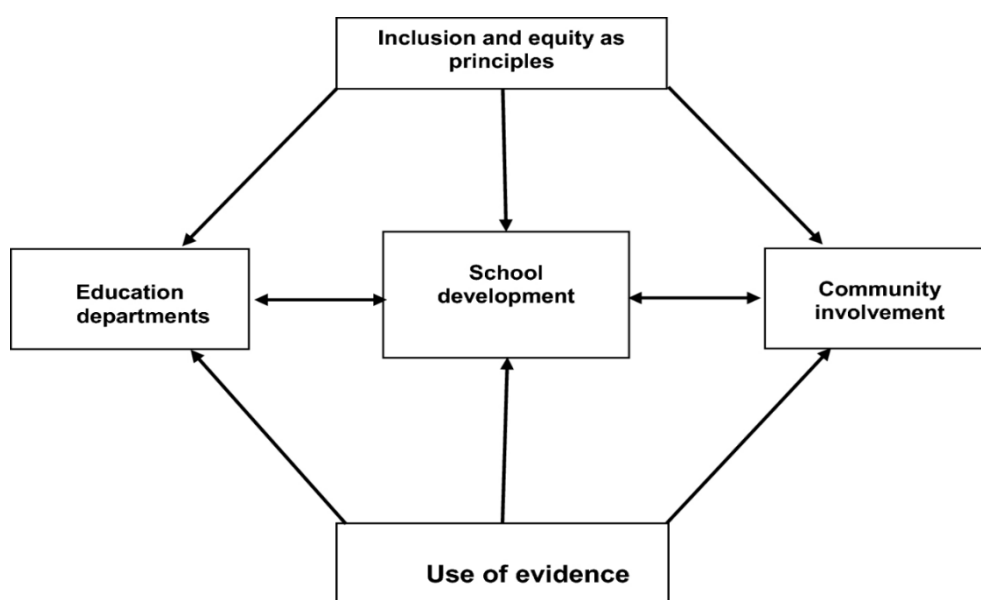
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Received: September 9, 2025; Revision Received: March 02, 2026; Accepted: March 06, 2026

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emphasizing inclusive and equitable learning to ensure that every citizen has the opportunity to dream, succeed, and contribute to the nation (Pinto, R. 2022).

The pursuit of equity and inclusion in education has become a central focus for educators, policymakers and communities worldwide. Education is often seen as a pathway to social mobility and economic advancement, yet many students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, face systemic barriers that hinder their access to quality education. These disparities can arise from a variety of factors, including poverty, race, gender, disability, and geographic location. Achieving equity in education requires not only ensuring equal access to resources but also actively creating an inclusive environment where all students can thrive, regardless of their circumstances. (Ainscow, M. 2020).



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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was launched on July 29th, 2020, replacing the NEP 1986 (Sahu, M. 2024). The NEP 2020 aims to include everyone, whether a minority or marginalized, by providing equal educational opportunities. The policy breaks all stereotypes, includes every field of study, and places them on equal footing. The multiple-entry and exit approach makes it viable for socially disadvantaged individuals. NEP 2020 aims to focus on all kinds of exclusion based on gender, religion, caste, and social status. The NEP 2020 also proposed a 'Gender Inclusion Fund' to improve the participation of girls and transgender students (Bansode, S. 2023). In India, education is perceived as a fundamental human right enshrined in the Constitution, yet many students, particularly those from marginalized communities, continue to face barriers to accessing quality education. The principle of equity calls for addressing these imbalances and ensuring that each child has the necessary resources, support, and opportunities to succeed (UNESCO, 2017).

In India, enhancing social equity plays a crucial role in elevating educational standards. By eliminating obstacles associated with socioeconomic status, caste, and gender, social justice promotes a diverse and inclusive learning environment. This approach helps lower dropout rates while also minimizing educational disparities. By ensuring equal opportunities for all learners, it paves the way for holistic development and ultimately enhances the overall quality of education (Singh et al., 2023).

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The following table presents the Indian constitutional provisions and approaches of NEP 2020 that foster equity and inclusion in education:

Table:1

Constitutional Provisions	NEP 2020
<p>The Preamble of the Constitution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights the significance of unbiased education • Encourage universal brotherhood 	<p>School Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to certify equal educational opportunities
<p>The Fundamental Rights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 15: Prohibits the State from displaying prejudice in education based on faith, social group, gender, ethnicity, or region of origin • Article 28: Provides individuals with the right to religious freedom within the context of educational institutions • Article 29(2): Protects students from being denied admission to educational institutions for discriminatory reasons • Article 30: Grants minority communities the right to create and oversee their own educational establishments 	<p>Equal and Inclusive Education in NEP 2020</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses disparities in the education system • Ensures equal opportunities for marginalized groups • Focuses on socio-economically deprived backgrounds
<p>Directive Principles of State Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 45: Education for All • Article 46: Upholds the educational and economic rights of marginalized communities 	<p>Inclusion of Disabled Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing resources, special educationalists, and assistive technology • Teacher training and awareness for disabled students
<p>Right to Education Act 2009</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory free and compulsory primary education • Early childhood care and education • Protection of weaker sections 	<p>Education for SC and ST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hostels, bridge courses, financial assistance • Inaugural NCC wings in tribal zones

(Singh & Mishra, 2023).

In the Indian context, educational inclusion is not just about integrating students with special needs into mainstream schools, but it also involves addressing diverse social, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds. To embrace this diversity and promote inclusion, there is a need for a student-centered curriculum, diverse teaching methods, accessible infrastructure, and well-trained teachers. The recently announced National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to provide a broad, multidisciplinary liberal education to all learners, with the target of raising the country's gross enrolment ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035. The policy envisions an education system that is deeply connected to India's traditions, culture, values, and ethos, striving to transform the nation into a more equitable, sustainable, and vibrant knowledge society (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

In India, significant educational disadvantages arise due to socioeconomic, cultural, caste, language, and gender factors, in addition to disability (Gale, L. 2022). To promote fairness

and inclusivity in education, governments must mobilize financial and human resources, some of which may not be directly within their control. It is therefore crucial to establish alliances with important stakeholders who can aid in the transformation process. These stakeholders include parents/caregivers, educators, researchers, and teacher trainers; administrators and managers at the national, local, and school levels; policymakers and service providers in other sectors such as health, Child welfare and social support systems, community and civic organizations, and minority groups vulnerable to marginalization (Ainscow, 2020).

Objectives of the Research Paper

The major objectives of this research paper are:

1. Understanding the concepts of Equity and Inclusion in Education.
2. Highlighting the key provisions of NEP 2020 related to Equity and Inclusion in the Indian education system.
3. Identifying the challenges surrounding the implementation of NEP 2020 to foster Equity and Inclusion.
4. Offering key strategies for optimizing the policy's impact in fostering a more Equitable and Inclusive education system.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH PAPER

The qualitative research methodology has been adopted for this research paper. A variety of publications, journals, research articles, books and other sources have provided secondary data for this research paper. The ideas and works of numerous authors in the field of academic and research are also incorporated into this study.

The Concept of Equity in Education

In education, the term “equity” refers to certifying justice and equality in educational resources and opportunities. To attain educational equity, it is essential to remove the structural barriers that prevent students from realizing their full potential. These barriers often include socioeconomic disparities, prejudice, and unequal resource distribution, which can prevent students from receiving a high-quality education. (Beerannavar & Pancrasius, 2024).

Equity in education goes beyond mere equality. While equality emphasizes giving the same resources to every student, equity focuses on allocating resources according to individual needs, thereby ensuring that each learner has a fair opportunity to succeed (Hammond, L. D. 2020). Equity involves recognizing and addressing the historical and societal challenges that disproportionately impact certain student groups. For example, students from low-income families frequently attend schools with fewer resources, which can hinder their academic achievement and limit their future opportunities. Similarly, students from marginalized racial or ethnic communities may face discrimination or cultural biases that negatively affect their educational journey (Gorski, 2017).

Promoting educational equity requires the adoption of targeted, research-informed strategies designed to mitigate systemic disparities. These strategies may include specialized interventions for students with learning disabilities, comprehensive language support for learners whose first language differs from the instructional medium, and the assurance of equitable access to advanced coursework and co-curricular programs for students from historically underrepresented populations. However, advancing equity also demands structural reform, particularly through the dismantling of entrenched barriers such as

segregation, chronic underfunding, and discriminatory policies that sustain cycles of marginalization and limit educational opportunities.

The Concept of Inclusion in Education

Inclusion refers to the practice of ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, are welcomed and fully participate in the educational process. Inclusive education involves not only accommodating diverse learning needs but also embracing diversity as a strength (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusive teaching is grounded in the principles of social justice and human rights, and is guided by the values of equity and fairness (Wijeratne et al., 2022).

For students with disabilities, inclusive education means providing appropriate support and accommodations to ensure that they can access the same curriculum as their peers. This could include modifications such as assistive technologies, individualized education plans (IEPs), or alternative teaching methods. In the case of students from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds, inclusion involves promoting cultural competence among educators and providing language support (Jordan, 2021).

Inclusion is not solely about accommodating differences; it is about recognizing that diversity enhances the learning environment. When students are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences, they are better prepared for life in an increasingly globalized world. Moreover, inclusive education promotes empathy, respect, and collaboration, which are essential skills for success in both personal and professional life.

Key Provisions of Nep 2020 Related to Equity and Inclusion in Education

- Acknowledging, identifying, and nurturing the unique capabilities of each student, by sensitizing teachers as well as parents to promote each student's holistic development in both academic and non-academic areas.
- Curriculum, pedagogy, and policy must respect diversity and local contexts, while recognizing that education falls under the concurrent list.
- Complete equity and inclusion as the foundation of all educational decisions to guarantee every student thrives in the education system (MHRD, 2020 & NEP, 2020).

Challenges of Equity and Inclusion in Education

Despite several efforts, India continues to face significant challenges in achieving equity and inclusion in education. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, systemic discrimination, and social attitudes that perpetuate inequality.

- **Implementation Challenges:** The process of converting the traditional education system into a new, sophisticated education system is very complex; it requires infrastructure facilities, good training and careful implementation of educational plans.
- **Resource Allocation:** It is extremely difficult to allocate adequate resources to achieve the ambitious goals of NEP 2020, without which efficient planning of infrastructure, training and financial assistance programs is not possible.
- **Digital Divide:** Variations in internet and technology access create a digital divide in the country; as a result, providing equitable access to online resources and digital education continues to be a major challenge.
- **Assurance of Quality:** As access to education expands, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the quality of educational resources and institutions.

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- **Equity in Financial Aid and Scholarships:** The main obstacle is making sure that economically poor and marginalized students can receive the financial aid and scholarships that NEP 2020 is aiming to provide.
- **Faculty Competency Development:** Faculty require extensive training and continuing professional development to guide themselves and their students in innovative pedagogical approaches that take linguistic diversity into account.
- **Reforms in Assessment:** NEP 2020 advocates continuous evaluation and implementation of a multidisciplinary approach, which requires significant changes in the existing evaluation system (Meena, M. 2015).
- **Cultural and Societal Biases:** Another barrier to equity and inclusion is the persistence of unconscious biases among educators. Studies have shown that teachers' expectations and treatment of students can be influenced by factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, the quality of teaching and learning available to children with disabilities has received relatively little scholarly and policy attention (Singal, 2019).

Thus, NEP 2020 faces numerous complications, even though it has the potential to address long-standing issues with inclusion, equity, and access in the Indian education system.

Strategies for Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Overcoming these barriers and advancing equity and inclusion in Indian education requires the implementation of well-designed strategies, including:

- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** Teachers should be trained to recognize and address the diverse needs of students. Professional development programs can enhance teachers' skills in dealing with cultural diversity, disabilities, and different learning needs.
- **Resource Allocation and Infrastructure Development:** Increased investment in educational infrastructure, particularly in rural and underfunded areas, is crucial. Schools need better facilities, including accessible classrooms, libraries, and technology, to support diverse learners.
- **Culturally Relevant Curriculum:** The curriculum should be revised to include content that reflects the diverse backgrounds of students. Textbooks should represent different cultures, languages, and histories, and teachers should use inclusive teaching methods that cater to all learners.
- **Policies for Marginalized Communities:** More targeted policies are needed to support marginalized groups, including SCs, STs, and students with disabilities. This could include financial assistance, mentorship programs, and the creation of safe learning environments free from discrimination.
- **Community Involvement:** Local communities should be involved in educational decision-making processes, ensuring that schools meet the needs of their students. Community-driven initiatives can play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of inclusive education and mobilizing resources.

Effective policymaking, coordinated efforts, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be necessary to address the challenges and ensure that the objectives of the policy are met for all societal segments.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Achieving equity and inclusion in education is a continuous and dynamic process that demands the active engagement of educators, policymakers, communities, and other stakeholders. It is not a one-time initiative but an ongoing commitment to identifying and

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addressing systemic barriers that hinder marginalized students from accessing and benefiting from quality education. These barriers may be rooted in socio-economic disparities, cultural biases, disabilities, language differences, or geographic limitations. Without intentional efforts to dismantle these obstacles, education systems risk perpetuating cycles of inequality rather than serving as a tool for social mobility.

To foster a truly inclusive educational environment, institutions must adopt practices that recognize and value diversity. This involves designing curricula that reflect the experiences and perspectives of all students, implementing teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning needs, and ensuring that school policies are free from discrimination. Equity in education does not mean treating every student the same; rather, it means providing resources, opportunities, and support tailored to individual circumstances so that all learners have a fair chance to succeed.

Policymakers play a critical role in this process by developing frameworks that promote inclusive education, allocating resources to underserved communities, and enforcing laws that protect students from discrimination. Likewise, educators must be equipped with the knowledge and training to create inclusive classrooms, fostering an atmosphere where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to participate fully in their learning journey. Beyond the classroom, communities also have a responsibility to support inclusive education by advocating for equal opportunities, engaging in dialogue about systemic inequalities, and fostering a culture of acceptance and respect. Collaboration among schools, families, and local organizations can help create supportive learning environments where every child, regardless of background, has the chance to thrive. When equity and inclusion become central to the educational system, the benefits extend beyond individual students. A society that provides equal educational opportunities for all fosters social cohesion, reduces economic disparities, and promotes innovation by harnessing the potential of a diverse population. Ultimately, by ensuring that every learner has access to high-quality education, we contribute to a more just, inclusive, and equitable world.

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative step in India's education system, seeking to address longstanding disparities and foster an equitable framework that ensures all learners, irrespective of their background, have access to high-quality education. By emphasizing equity and inclusion, NEP 2020 seeks to dismantle systemic barriers and empower marginalized communities through targeted interventions. One of the core strategies of NEP 2020 is the provision of equitable scholarships that cater to underprivileged students, ensuring financial constraints do not hinder educational opportunities. Additionally, the introduction of an inclusive curriculum that represents diverse cultures, histories, and perspectives fosters a learning environment where every student feels seen and valued. To support this, faculty development and training programs are being strengthened to equip educators with the skills needed to address diverse learning needs effectively. Moreover, dedicated support services, such as counselling, mentorship programs, and remedial learning, play a crucial role in levelling the playing field for disadvantaged learners. Beyond institutional reforms, community engagement is a key pillar of NEP 2020, recognizing that inclusive education requires a collaborative approach involving parents, local organizations, and policymakers. Continuous monitoring mechanisms ensure that policies are effectively implemented, while flexible assessment methods accommodate diverse learning styles, moving away from rigid examination-based evaluation to a more holistic approach.

NEP 2020 also presents an opportunity for India to strengthen its position as a global leader in education, often referred to as “Vishv Guru.” By attracting international students and fostering cross-border collaborations, India can enhance its educational influence worldwide. However, for this vision to be realized, it is essential to simplify implementation processes, ensuring that the policy's ambitious goals translate into tangible outcomes. As India stands at this crucial juncture, the successful execution of NEP 2020 will determine its ability to build an education system that is accessible, inclusive, and globally competitive, truly making education a beacon of opportunity for all.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Chaudhary, S. & Kumar, S. (2026). NEP 2020: A Transformative Step Toward Equity and Inclusion in Education. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 1147-1155. DIP:18.01.113.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.113