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<u>Analysing Non-Inclusive New Education Policy 2020 Concerning Children from Marginalised Community and Proposing Solutions</u>

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Abstract

This research paper aims to analyse the new National Education Policy 2020 in the context of marginalised sections of India. The paper limits its research to some marginalised communities namely Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, children from urban slums and children with special abilities. It concentrates on different problems relating to children belonging to (above stated) marginalised communities separately. The paper includes the shortcomings of NEP 2020 with reference to the inclusivity of marginalised children in India. It defines inclusivity in education along with elaborating on why some communities categorised as marginalised need inclusivity in policies formed by the government. Lastly, the research is concluded by some treatments suggested to the policy in order to make it more inclusive for marginalised children.

Keywords: *New Education Policy, marginalized, inclusivity, equitable education*

1.0 Introduction

Education is the process of acquiring knowledge that prepares a thriving present and leads to a stable future. It is a necessity and therefore we count it as a right. But unfortunately, we don't see every child carrying books in their hands and certainly, we want the government to make policies to ensure that every child gets a chance to enjoy a stable future.

The new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, is a document which directs for the structural betterment of the education system by innovative and progressive ideas. It does have a lot of positive aspects but we can't deny the non-inclusiveness of the educational aspirations of the marginalised sections of the society. The NEP focuses on the need of digital education, but it fails to recognise how smartphones, laptops, wifi and for that matter the skills to use them remains a distant dream for most of the children from rural and marginalised sections of the society.

Such children have relatively little control over their lives, and the resources available to them. They face discrimination by teachers and other school staff and are continuously considered as *"others"* despite laws prohibiting discrimination and constitutional guarantees ("India: Marginalized Children Denied Education" 2014). Such discrimination is faced by thousands of children in our country. This paper focuses on the issues of such marginalised children from the following sections of society:

1. Dalits (scheduled castes)

2. Adivasis (Scheduled tribes)

3. Children from urban slums

4. Children with disabilities (facing biased assumptions, harmful stereotypes, irrational fears and poverty)

According to the government, nearly half of the children – over 80 million children – drop out before completing their elementary education ("India: Marginalized Children Denied Education" 2014). As per the 2011 census, more than 10.1 million children in the age group 5-14 years are engaged in child labour ("New Education Policy-2020 What's in the Plate for Marginal Students?" 2020). According to the latest survey data from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2017-18 the annual average dropout rate of SC students at the secondary school level is at 21.8% and for ST students, it is 22.3% (Jebaraj, "Fall in funds" 2020).

This data is enough to indicate why is it important to talk about policies regarding education concerning the majority of the population of India i.e. **The Marginalised Community**. This research paper aims to find out the shortcomings in the National Education Policy 2020 concerning marginalised children; the social, economical and political challenges faced by the society due to the lack of educational facilities for marginalised community and the treatments to the policy in order to make it more inclusive.

2.0 What is inclusivity?

According to UNICEF, 'Inclusive education' allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, to the benefit of all. ("Inclusive Education," n.d.) Reaching excluded and marginalized groups and providing them with quality education requires the development and implementation of inclusive policies and programmes. Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education and the Education 2030 Framework for Action emphasize inclusion and equity as laying the foundations for quality education ("Inclusion in Education"). Equity in education paves the way to ***Inclusive Education***.

The term inclusive education often implies the inclusiveness of children with special abilities i.e. disabled children. And often the term inclusivity is used interchangeably with integrity, but the former term is more justifiable to this paper as it deals with inclusivity of children from scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, urban slums and also disabled children. These communities make more than half of the population of India. And a considerable part of this population still struggles with availing itself of the right to education. Each of their advancement contributes to the development and growth of the country thus, it is only one reason out of many to prioritise inclusivity in the education sector. The term inclusive refers to 'all' as has been suggested by the commentators. Chadha (2000, p. 10) defines inclusion as: 'Providing to all children (irrespective of the kind and degree of disability) equitable opportunities, to receive effective educational services with needed supplementary aids and support services in age-appropriate classes in their neighbourhood schools'. 'All' is used to refer to children with disabilities, namely intellectual, physical and sensory (as is evident from the article). Azad (2001, p. 1) starts with the emphasis on 'all' and identifies 'able-bodied, disabled, at-risk, health-impaired, ethnic and cultural minorities, scheduled caste/scheduled tribe, slow learners, street children etc.', but in his paper, he argues about disabled children only. (Singal, "Inclusive education in India…")

3.0 Problems faced by marginalised communities

While some sections of the society take things for granted, some other sections acknowledge them as privileges. Education may seem like a basic right to the upper class, socio-economically well off children, but at the very opposite side, for other marginalised sections, even today, education is crowned as a luxury. According to an Oxfam Report, Nearly 75% (32% Dalits, 16.4% tribals and 25.7% Muslims) of 6 million children currently out of school belong to the socially marginalized communities. ("NEP Will Add to the Existing Rural-Urban Divide That Has Caused Great Damage to the Marginalised" 2020)
These sections of society, which lack educational facilities because of several reasons such as poverty, social backwardness, cultural disparity and even unacceptance by some sections of humans, face different problems even after numerous policies being implemented by the government.

3.1 Children of urban slums

Policies are often not implemented properly, for instance even if the schools for urban slums are provided with computers they will lack internet connection; sometimes children are not even allowed to touch them, becoming skilled being a distant ambition. The standard of teaching is low which directly affects the job opportunities they are offered in future. Many a time students pursuing higher education struggle for books, which due to their economic backwardness remains an expensive dream. Apart from this, they and their parents repeatedly prioritise earning rather than learning. They believe education is a waste of time and money. Marginalised communities lack even an adequate amount of control on basic resources that some people possess abundantly. Overcrowded households with no electricity, and the steady appearance of cheap transistors, TVs and now, videos, make it difficult and sometimes impossible to concentrate on studies. Domestic violence under the influence of alcohol, women quarrelling at the common taps under frustration tends to distract children from their studies. The research on learners has shown that, among dropouts, 19 out of 25 had no electricity at home and 10 had no place to study. This was true of good performers in the case of only 2 who had no electricity and 8 who had no place to study. Only 2 of the dropouts said they had no problems connected with the positive conditions required for study while among good performers as many as 14 had no such problems. (Desai, "Education of child in urban slums…", 523.) Also one of the major problems faced is that these children believe that they will not fit in the mainstream because of the economic difference and socio-cultural lag.

3.2 Children from scheduled tribes

Tribal children have major issues in the language or medium of instruction at schools. They mostly communicate in their own peculiar or vernacular language although they sometimes are well equipped with the skill of communicating in their state language as well. On top of that, it is seen that the methods of teaching are often ineffective, unattractive and seem tedious to a child. Nearly 50% of the children from this social group **drop out** while transitioning from primary to secondary grades (based on 2011 census). Nearly 80% of them **stop education** when they are in grade X There is almost a 14%-point gap between the literacy rates of the STs and the rest (2011 census) of the population ("Schooling of Scheduled Tribes in India," n.d.). With such a considerable gap between literacy rates and horrifying statistics, we can not normalise the

illiteracy and poverty prevailing in this section of society. Many policies have been made but due to lack of proper implementation, we still see scheduled tribes struggling with a basic right of education more than any other marginalised community in India.

3.3 Children from scheduled castes

Along with some common problems, children belonging to the Scheduled Castes face a very high degree of **Social Discrimination**. They are frequently bullied by the upper caste children and parents, teachers and staff too. Teachers tend to ignore their problems related to the medium of education, resource availability etc. Studies also show that even today, many of the schools in rural India practice physical segregation and untouchability. Drinking water facilities are not yet open to all and students under the 'general category' do not interact with the SC students (Desai, 1976; Kulke, 1983a). (Wankhede. "Social and Educational Problems of Scheduled Castes: Some Critical Insights..." n.d.)

It is believed that they perform poorly because they lack intelligence but the truth is that their intelligence is suppressed by their stigmatised social status and utterly adverse economic conditions. There are numerous evidence to show that unemployment and underemployment among the educated middle class are very conspicuous, despite the reservation policy (Ram, 1988; Wankhede, 1993). Factors like caste discrimination, irregularities and favouritism play a major role in the employment market. The employer, the management and the fellow rivals all belong to upper castes and the entire recruitment process is under their control (Wankhede. "Social and Educational Problems of Scheduled Castes: Some Critical Insights..." n.d.). This unemployment faced due to lack of proper education and corruption drives them to poverty and this creates a vicious cycle, which needs to be broken at one point.

3.4 Children with special needs

The 2019 "State of the Education Report for India: Children with Disabilities" took into account the 2011 census, according to which there are 78,64,636 children with disability in India constituting 1.7 per cent of the total child population. Three-fourths of the children with disabilities at the age of five years and one-fourth between 5-19 years do not go to any educational institution. 75% of children with disabilities **don't attend schools** in India -

UNESCO report said. ("75% of children with disabilities don't attend schools" 2019) The number of children enrolled in school drops significantly with each successive level of schooling. Statistics show that the education of girls gets more affected. There are **fewer girls** with disabilities in schools than boys with disabilities. Specific disability categories and genders are affected disproportionately. For instance, children with autism and cerebral palsy and girls with disabilities are least likely to be enrolled in schools. Less than 40% of school buildings have ramps and around 17% of schools have accessible toilets (Bhatia 2018).

We can look at schools in our surroundings to check if the student-teacher ratio is acceptable. Along with properly trained teachers, the so-called "all-inclusive" schools also lack other resources which help disabled children such as ramp proper teaching materials etc. It is often seen that peers bully and even rebuke Children with special needs. Sometimes due to lack of knowledge of disabilities, teachers and staff also harm them instead of guiding and uplifting them.

4.0 Shortcomings of NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 is a new policy to address the crippling challenges that have affected the Indian Education System for over three decades. On close scrutiny, the policy does little to address specific, well-known and endemic problems that plague India's education system. Most of the proposed interventions do appear to be well-meaning. But because they are based on a shallow understanding of the ground realities of education in an unequal society, they could suffer deep infirmities in execution. Several innovations proposed by NEP 2020 could exacerbate existing educational challenges and perpetuate **inequality**. (Batra, "Is NEP designed to deliver quality education " 2020).

NEP aims to digitalise learning and strengthen students technologically and that seems good when looked at from the upper surface but when we dig deeper, we can see it has ignored the fact that marginalised children still struggle to even get into the schools. So it tends to neglect the major barriers in the education of marginalised communities which hinders them to even continue with their studies. Especially, the girl child who is often not allowed to continue with her studies due to problems starting from the prevalent practice of child marriage to taboos around menstruation. NEP appears to take a long leap rather than taking up the realistic steps in favour of marginalised communities predominantly.

4.1 Ignorance of already existing important policies:

Right to Education Act (RTE) implemented in 2010 aims at establishing the duty of the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children between the age group of 6-14 (basically class 8th)

- Although RTE is still a law, NEP doesn't treat it as a baseline anywhere. Secondly, when NEP talks about universalising education from preschool to 12th standard it relegates RTE as a past initiative, it seems that NEP is restricted to talks about universalising and doesn't give any clarity on how it will be achieved or ensured further.

- As the RTE forum stated in a statement: "The final policy talks about the universalisation of school education from 3-18 years, without making it a legal right. Hence there is no mandatory mechanism for the union and state governments to make it a reality. Without the RTE Act, universalisation will be very difficult." (IPC 2020) There are millions of children who would be less than six years of age and the preparatory education sector operates in a pretty unregulated manner. Thus, without forcing the plans to come under the purview of a legal act like RTE, this would be a lofty idea put on paper without a legal underpinning for the states; a promise made without much thought on implementation and the huge costs. (Sharma, "NEP 2020: why is it euphoria around a grand vision need reflection" 2020)

4.2 Encouraging Privatisation in Education:

The NEP says "restrictions with regard to infrastructure and inputs of all kinds will be relaxed to allow non-government philanthropic organisations and alternative models of schools to come and set up and enable universalisation". (Sharma, "NEP 2020: why is it euphoria around a grand vision need reflection" 2020)

- This may appear to be a good initiative but because NEP 2020 is silent on RTE and how universalisation will be achieved, it seems to be making provisions for the proliferation of low-income **private** schools which have increased immensely

in the past decade. Besides, these private schools have been proven unsustainable in the long term as they run on low budgets.

● The policy's thrust on privatization, especially in higher education may act as a deterrent for education equalities and vistas for the **disadvantaged and marginalized students.** It is ironic that the NEP that claims to 'provide education to historically marginalised, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups lays the roadmap for the privatisation of higher education. (Agarwal, "why we must be critical of NEP" 2020)

4.3 Establishing Special Education Zones (SEZs):

The NEP 2020 puts all the marginalised categories- SC, ST, OBC, minorities, the poor and even children with special abilities in one basket and calls them socio-economically disadvantaged groups. And it suggests establishing SEZs for these groups which include community-led volunteering, peer tutoring, special certification courses for teachers in these zones (different from the 4-year integrated model).

● Here it is interesting to note that in the first place, it totally ignores the differences existing between marginalised communities which constitutes 80% of the population and secondly, it tends to disregard the categories given in the Constitution.

● Now coming to the SEZs, it may elaborate the existing differences between the marginalised and non marginalised population. As suggested by Kothari Commission (1964), the **common school system** model in which children from different social and economic backgrounds shall study together, which will perhaps establish and strengthen the foundation of inclusive society right from the school level. But NEP tends to exacerbate not just social and economic inequalities but also educational inequalities (Sharma, "NEP 2020: why is it euphoria around a grand vision need reflection" 2020). This stands as a major barrier in inclusive education further.

4.4 Ignored Digital Divide:

While there is a lot of focus in NEP on using technology in every aspect of education - education planning, teaching, learning and assessment, administration & management, setting up virtual labs, digitally equipping schools, mentoring and setting up forums - the policy tends to ignore the following statistics.

- In recent times the cost of the internet has seen an increase owing to market monopolies. The majority of the learners will be excluded, only 35.1% of government schools had access to functional computers in 2016-17 according to UDISE+. According to the same data set, the overall percentage of schools with functional computers is down from 42.1% in 2012-13 to 36.8% in 2016-17 (IPC 2020).

- Further, only 24% of Indian households have an internet facility, 11% of households have a functional computer, and a little over 15% of rural households have access to the internet. (Kundu, n.d.)

- Parents from marginalised communities already struggle with the expense of basic educational facilities such as stationery, books etc; it shall prove highly difficult for them to be able to cope with the burdened expenses of digital add ons. It must not be forgotten that only 24% of adults have smartphones in India. (Krishnan 2019)

This statistics clearly show how meagrely equipped the governmental institutions with digital gadgets are. It is also noticed that teachers and staff are not very well trained in the same skill. When seen from the lens of gender, class, caste and urban-rural regional differences, we see a substantial digital divide. An over-reliance on technology and online programs to achieve set targets is impractical.

4.5 Issues with imparting education:

Anganwadi workers are seen as key to the early education plan of the NEP. The prospect of a large number of our three-year-old children going to the multi-tasked and inadequately equipped Anganwadis for pre-school, play and development is hardly reassuring.

- One of the main reasons being that Anganwadi workers lack the requisite specialised training for the development of these children in their most impressionable years.

- Secondly, what is probable is that the affluent would find alternatives to the Anganwadis for their children, while the poorer sections would have no choice. (Philip, "some hits and misses of NEP" 2020)

- To achieve quality ECCE (Early Childhood Children Education) the reliance on overburdened Anganwadis is unfair. Their salaries are meagre and this expectation creates an undue burden. The government might face resistance to implementation.

- Government teachers, even when paid high salaries, do not carry out their jobs properly. They either ignore the problem faced by marginalised communities due to lack of knowledge or they give up on these kids due to constant struggle between deficient resources (including teachers as resources) and low attendance.

- Familiarising the teachers-who already struggle to cover the basic syllabus at primary level-better with digital know-how, will not be an easy task. NEP allows 6 months for the training of teachers at Anganwadi, which seems impractical and vain.

4.6 Ignorance of Children with Disabilities:

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) has been hailed as a new era in educational reform. However, it exists within a framework of pervasive policy gaps in the education of children with disabilities.

- Instilling quality education since childhood helps understand and detect the need for intervention early for children with disabilities. Thus it is quite unacceptable for disabilities to have been omitted from early childhood care and education programme

● NEP allows for education privatisation and autonomy without accountability. Thus the private institutions seem to reap the benefits without bearing any kind of responsibility for inclusiveness and accessibility. Inclusive education in India has been described as exclusive of children with disabilities. Disabled children rarely progress beyond primary school, and only 9% complete secondary education. Around 45% of disabled people are illiterate and only 62.9% of disabled people between the ages of 3 and 35 have ever attended regular schools.

The most vital objective of institutionalising education, 'empowering of minorities', the NEP-2020 in the final 62-page document mentioned the word 'minorities' only thrice, with almost non-existent detail but only as a passing mention of an essential reading that would make us realise what the situation is like. Other than some references to inequalities of caste and lip service to scheduled castes, the NEP 2020 policy doesn't really speak about how it might accommodate the rife social-economic-cultural inequalities we have in our society ("non-inclusive NEP 2020." the siasat daily).

Through the NEP, the government promises to bring innovation, diversity, inclusion and a multi-disciplinary approach to inculcate "critical thinking"; they fail to tell us "*how*". Their plan to start holistic development of marginalised children when marginalised and upper-class children are not on the same page and have a major difference in the education being provided rings hollow.

5.0 Possible Treatments to the Policy

5.1 Social skills

One major reason why these students don't prefer to go to schools of their own accord is perhaps that they have to try too hard to fit in and make friends; they often feel left out and that can also hamper the learning process and the will to study since peer groups are an extremely important influence in school.

So, teachers should also focus on improving their social skills and also making sure that the parents and children are at the same level by informing the parents about their children's progress both intellectually and socially. The schools should have interactive extracurricular activities that will help the children to develop more confidence and friendships alike!

5.2 Financial assistance

Through providing scholarships, incentives, stationery materials, textbooks, schoolbags, transportation costs etc. we can mostly see if such material assistance is provided to the children's parents for sending the children to schools, it motivates them and also relieves them of some of the many burdens that they have. The material aid should not just be limited to policy recommendations and papers but should be made available to these children in schools in reality too.

5.3 Health and Nutrition

A healthy body is extremely important for a healthy mind. So, annual medical checkups of the children can be made mandatory. NGOs and community welfare organisations working with marginalised children should also take up various initiatives to ensure the health of marginalised children. Schools for marginalised should also provide nutritious mid-day meals every day to all the students which should be monitored and be in good condition ("Innovations in Education of Marginalised Children").

5.4 Classroom Structure

Seating arrangements should be made in a way that children are comfortable during the teaching-learning sessions. An able learner can be placed near a disabled learner, so that the weaker one can learn from the other ("English as a Second Language (ESL) for Inclusive Education" 2017). Also, apart from theoretical learnings, schools should be made to develop skilful intelligence of children, so that they can become an asset without getting exploited by child labour activities.

5.5 Language and Cultures

The learning of another language, different to that of the mother tongue, and talking about each other's cultures, costumes, dresses etc. are a very important part of inclusive education, as it encourages intercultural respect and tolerance for each other and different groups in a diverse society or country.

5.6 Regulating privatisation

The centralization by the government through a single body of higher education commission of India might impede the evolution of education in India. The exclusivity of Indian education will prevail until regulations are placed on private institutions and promotion of accessibility and fund driven policy for state-owned institutions aren't pushed. Teachers from the local level are needed to be trained and they need to be held accountable. The NEP 2020 will definitely change education in India but the question of inclusive and open education, especially for the ones who need it the most, remains (Chetia,"education in India is still exclusive" 2020).

6.0 Conclusion

The objective of this research paper was to analyse the new National Education Policy 2020 in the context of inclusive education of the marginalised community. With that in mind, this paper defines inclusivity in education and also argues why problems of some sections of Indian society need to be addressed. It talks about how NEP 2020 has failed to address some of the basic and important issues of marginalised communities of Indian society.

Through various researches, towards the end, the author has his paper suggests solutions to the NEP for more inclusive education to be practised. Due to COVID-19, we were not able to do survey-based research but we have taken into account many statistics published by the governmental organisations along with private journals. Studies prove that the teaching and learning in primary schools can be improved using creative modes of teaching.

Education completely transforms children's lives by helping them overcome their biggest obstacle i.e. poverty. In the long term, a good education also promotes peace and post-conflict resolution as these children then develop the skills needed to build a good life for themselves and prosperity for their communities ("The right to education." SavetheChildren). Illiteracy is that door through which poverty enters. If an education policy fails to talk about even one small section of society then it can be criticised on a considerable account.

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