

NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a critical juncture in India's pedagogical history, promising an inclusive, flexible, and multidisciplinary framework. However, from a sociological vantage point, its implementation occurs within a "stratified society" characterized by entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and regionality. This paper examines the systemic challenges of translating the policy's egalitarian rhetoric into transformative practice for marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus, alongside Basil Bernstein's code theory, the research investigates how the structural "digital divide" and the marketization of higher education may inadvertently reinforce existing social inequities. The study argues that while the policy introduces progressive mechanisms like "Special Education Zones" (SEZs) and the "Gender Inclusion Fund," the underlying socio-economic barriers—ranging from linguistic hegemony to the "hidden curriculum" of elite institutions—pose significant threats to genuine social mobility. By analyzing the tension between state-led universalization and neoliberal privatization, this article highlights the risk of "symbolic violence" where the marginalized are integrated into a system that devalues their indigenous knowledge and local vernaculars. The findings underscore the need for a more "bottom-up" sociological approach to policy execution that prioritizes the lived experiences of the socially disadvantaged over standardized metrics of global competitiveness.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Social Stratification, Marginalized Communities, Cultural Capital, Educational Inequality, Sociology of Education

Education in India has never been a neutral field of knowledge transmission; rather, it is a contested site of social reproduction and mobility. As Pierre Bourdieu argued in *The Forms of Capital* (1986), the school system often functions to validate the cultural capital of the dominant classes while alienating those from the periphery. This institutionalized "gatekeeping" ensures that the linguistic nuances, social networks, and behavioral predispositions of the elite are rewarded as "merit," while the indigenous knowledge systems and vernacular strengths of marginalized groups are dismissed as "deficiencies." In the Indian context, this is compounded by the "graded inequality" of the caste system, where access to literacy was historically a guarded privilege.

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NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

NEP-2020 seeks to transform this rigid architecture by introducing a 5+3+3+4 structure and emphasizing vocational integration, theoretically moving away from the "factory model" of learning. However, the sociological reality of India—defined by deeply entrenched caste hierarchies, stark regional disparities, and class-based digital divides—poses a formidable challenge to the "equitable and vibrant knowledge society" the policy envisions. For instance, the transition to a multidisciplinary approach requires a level of institutional resource-richness that is often absent in state-run schools serving the rural poor. The consequence of such structural gaps is that while the policy offers "flexibility" to the student, the socio-economic environment often dictates a "path of least resistance," potentially funnelling marginalized youth into lower-tier vocational tracks while the affluent leverage the new system to further diversify their intellectual portfolio. Thus, without a radical redistributive logic, the policy's structural changes risk becoming new mechanisms for old inequalities.

HISTORICAL SHIFTS: FROM NPE-1986 TO NEP-2020:

The shift from the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 to the 2020 framework reflects a profound transition from a state-led social welfare model to a more decentralized, technology-driven, and globally competitive paradigm. NPE-1986 was conceived in an era of state-centrism, where the primary objective was the "equalization of educational opportunity" through aggressive state funding and the physical expansion of infrastructure—building schools in every habitation to tackle the sheer problem of access. In contrast, NEP-2020 operates within a neoliberal logic that prioritizes "efficiency," "autonomy," and "global standards," often assuming a level playing field that does not exist.

Sociologically, the introduction of the umbrella term "Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups" (SEDGs) marks a significant taxonomic shift. While the term aims to be inclusive, it carries the inherent risk of "homogenizing the heterogeneous." By grouping together various forms of marginalization—including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), OBCs, females, transgender individuals, and inhabitants of aspirational districts—under one administrative category, the policy risks flattening the unique historical specificities and "graded exclusions" inherent to each group. As Sukhadeo Thorat emphasizes in his research on "Blocked Transitions," the barriers faced by a Dalit student (grounded in ritual pollution and social stigma) are fundamentally different from those faced by a rural poor student of a dominant caste. When policy treats these diverse exclusions as a singular "disadvantage," it may fail to provide the group-specific interventions—such as robust reservation implementations or anti-discrimination cells—that are necessary to dismantle specific social hierarchies. Furthermore, the shift toward "decentralization" often places the burden of quality on local communities and private players, which sociologists argue can exacerbate existing regional disparities, as backward regions lack the "social capital" to attract top-tier investment or faculty.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: STRATIFICATION, MARGINALIZATION, AND EDUCATION:

The analysis of NEP-2020 requires a robust conceptual framework rooted in the works of social scientists like Basil Bernstein and Andre Beteille. Following Beteille's insights on inequality, education in India often mirrors the stratified nature of the social order where hierarchies are maintained through unequal access to resources, and the concept of meritocracy often masks inherited privilege. This structural inequality is further complicated by Bernstein's theory of "elaborated" and "restricted" codes, which posits that children from dominant social classes

NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

enter the school system already equipped with the linguistic and cognitive frameworks that schools demand, whereas children from marginalized backgrounds must navigate an alien academic discourse. Marginalization in this context is viewed not as a static state but as a dynamic, cumulative process occurring through linguistic exclusion, where the dominance of English and standardized vernaculars suppresses indigenous knowledge and tribal dialects. Furthermore, the digital divide is not merely a lack of hardware but a "knowledge divide" that creates new forms of class barriers, separating those who can participate in a high-tech knowledge economy from those relegated to the digital periphery. Drawing on the reproduction thesis of Bowles and Gintis in their seminal work *Schooling in Capitalist America*, we must examine if the current education system is designed to produce a compliant, tiered workforce. This involves scrutinizing whether the system essentially offers "survival-based" vocational training for the marginalized to sustain the lower rungs of the service economy, while reserving high-end research, creative labor, and leadership roles for the privileged elite who possess the requisite social and economic capital to navigate the new educational flexibility.

KEY PROVISIONS OF NEP-2020 RELEVANT TO MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES:

NEP-2020 introduces the umbrella term Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), a category that seeks to institutionalize a more intersectional approach by encompassing Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, females, transgender individuals, minorities, and geographical identities. By grouping these diverse identities under one nomenclature, the policy acknowledges that disadvantage is rarely isolated but often multi-dimensional; for instance, an Adivasi girl in a remote district faces a compounding of caste, gender, and regional marginality. One of the primary instruments for equity is the Gender Inclusion Fund, which is aimed at providing equitable quality education for all girls and transgender students. This fund is not merely about financial aid but also about creating institutional mechanisms to address the "safety-access-sanitation" triad that often forces marginalized girls to drop out at puberty. Additionally, the policy proposes the creation of Special Education Zones (SEZs)—geographically defined areas with high populations of SEDGs where the state promises intensified resource allocation, targeted scholarships, and a higher density of high-quality educational institutions to counteract decades of historical neglect and infrastructure gaps.

A particularly significant sociological move is the advocacy for instruction in home languages or mother tongues at least until Grade 5. This provision seeks to validate the cultural identity of rural and tribal children who have long been alienated by a "submersion" model of education, where the use of a dominant regional or national language functioned as a symbolic violence, rendering the child's home world invisible. By legitimizing local dialects and tongues, the policy potentially bridges the "cognitive gap" between the home environment and the classroom. Furthermore, the integration of vocational exposure from Grade 6 onwards, including internships with local artisans or technicians, is presented as a strategy to reduce the dropout rate and provide "employable skills" to students who might otherwise leave the system entirely due to economic pressure. However, this remains a point of intense sociological debate, as it raises questions about the early "tracking" of students into non-academic streams. Critics worry that this could lead to a "cooling out" process where marginalized students are discouraged from pursuing higher professional education, steered instead toward vocational paths based on their current socio-economic standing rather than their inherent intellectual potential.

NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES IN A STRATIFIED SOCIETY:

Despite the inclusive language within the policy document, several profound challenges emerge when these provisions meet the bedrock of Indian social reality. While the policy pushes for online and digital education to enhance reach, data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS) suggest that a significant percentage of marginalized households lack stable internet connectivity, electricity, and private devices. This effectively creates a "new stratification" where pedagogical quality is directly proportional to technological access, potentially leaving millions of rural students behind in a "digital ghetto." Sociologists further warn that pushing vocational education as early as Grade 6 might inadvertently channel children from marginalized backgrounds into traditional manual or semi-skilled occupations, reinforcing the ancient, varna-linked division of labor rather than dismantling it. If a Dalit or Adivasi child is encouraged toward "vocational skills" while an upper-caste urban peer is groomed for "critical thinking and coding," the policy may unintentionally provide a modern veneer to age-old social hierarchies. The language dilemma also persists in a globalized market; while mother-tongue instruction is pedagogically sound for early literacy, the continued hegemony of English as the language of high-status employment means that those who do not transition early and effectively to English may remain at a permanent disadvantage. Finally, the push for institutional autonomy and private philanthropy in education—often termed as "light but tight" regulation—may lead to increased costs and fee hikes. This commercialization of the educational space risks pricing out students from lower-income groups who have historically relied on subsidized public higher education as their only viable ladder for vertical social mobility.

SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS: REPRODUCTION OR TRANSFORMATION?

The fundamental inquiry confronting the contemporary researcher is whether NEP-2020 functions as a catalyst for social transformation or as a sophisticated apparatus for social reproduction. Drawing upon Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's seminal philosophy in *The Annihilation of Caste*, education is envisioned as a revolutionary tool to "educate, agitate, and organize." However, when viewed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, the school system often acts as a site where existing social relations are legitimized rather than challenged. A salient example is the introduction of "multiple entry and exit points" in higher education. In a society defined by what Ronald Dore termed the "Diploma Disease," an "exit" is socially stratified. For a student from an urban, upper-middle-class background, an exit after the first year might be a strategic "gap year" for an internship or personal branding, buffered by a financial safety net. Conversely, for a Dalit student in a rural block, an exit is frequently a coerced response to agrarian distress or family debt—an involuntary "push-out" rather than a choice. This results in the accumulation of low-value certificates that reinforce a "certificate inflation" where the marginalized are trapped in precarious, informal labor markets, while the elite continue toward the prestigious four-year degree.

Furthermore, applying Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, true education must foster "conscientization" (*conscientização*)—the critical awareness of one's socio-political location. If the implementation of NEP-2020 prioritizes "market-aligned vocational efficiency" over critical humanities, it risks bypassing this liberating potential. For instance, when a tribal student is steered towards local vocational crafts through Grade 6 internships without a corresponding curriculum that deconstructs the historical marginalization of tribal labor, the

NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

education system risks producing "compliant workers" for the industrial-capitalist complex rather than "critical citizens." This echoes the concerns of Paul Willis in *Learning to Labour*, where working-class children are culturally conditioned to accept their place in the lower rungs of the economic hierarchy.

The policy's emphasis on "Indian Knowledge Systems" (IKS) also presents a battleground for cultural hegemony. For this to be transformative, it must embrace the "Subaltern" perspective, as argued by Ranajit Guha, highlighting the diverse, anti-caste, and egalitarian traditions of the Shramana or Bhakti movements. If, however, IKS is implemented as a monolithic narrative that sanitizes historical injustices or excludes the profound ecological wisdom of Adivasi communities, it becomes a tool for "symbolic violence." It validates the "habitus" of the dominant classes while rendering the cultural heritage of the marginalized invisible or inferior. Consequently, the success of NEP-2020 in achieving a truly democratic social order hinges on whether it can dismantle the "hidden curriculum" that equates merit with privilege and vocationalism with destiny.

CONCLUSION

NEP-2020 articulates an undeniably ambitious framework for restructuring Indian education, yet its eventual success or failure is contingent upon its capacity to aggressively navigate the heavy, suffocating gravity of social stratification. While the recognition of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) signals a profound normative commitment to equity, we must assert as sociologists that the state cannot simply "policy-engineer" its way out of centuries of systemic inequality through superficial resource allocation. For NEP-2020 to transcend its role as a neoliberal manifesto and become a genuine instrument of liberation, the state must take the brave step of actively dismantling the structural barriers of caste-based prejudice, digital apartheid, and the predatory commercialization of the schooling sector. Implementation must be rigorously attentive to the intersectional interplay of caste, class, gender, region, disability, and linguistic diversity to ensure that the promise of the policy for marginalized communities results in dignified participation and epistemic recognition rather than mere physical access.

The goal of achieving a truly equitable educational landscape remains a utopian mirage if the implementation process continues to be measured by sanitized metrics like gross enrollment ratios. A rational, research-driven critique demands a rigorous "sociological audit"—a monitoring mechanism that moves beyond the facade of participation to scrutinize the actual quality of learning outcomes, the erosion of the "hidden curriculum" of exclusion, and the tangible social mobility of the most marginalized. Only when the education system ceases to be a machine for social reproduction and begins to function as a site of radical democratic transformation can we claim that the spirit of the policy has been realized. Ultimately, constant sociological vigilance and democratic accountability will determine whether NEP-2020 becomes a robust vehicle for social justice or merely another sophisticated layer in the historical reproduction of inequality. The path forward requires not just administrative efficiency, but the political and intellectual courage to confront the stratified reality of the Indian social order head-on.

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NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

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NEP-2020 and Marginalized Communities: Challenges of Implementation in a Stratified Society

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Conflict of Interest

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