

## **Equity, Inclusion, and Multilingualism in Indian Education**

**Rita R.Luise, Master's in Education**

**Research Scholar, GlobalNxt University**

[ritaluise2018@gmail.com](mailto:ritaluise2018@gmail.com), [rr19157@campus.globalnxt.edu.my](mailto:rr19157@campus.globalnxt.edu.my)

### **Abstract**

This chapter critically examines the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, focusing on its contradictions and shortcomings regarding equity, inclusion, and multilingualism in Indian education. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories, it explores how caste, gender, disability, language, and displacement continue to drive educational inequality. Using thematic coding and case studies from Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Delhi, and tribal regions, the chapter identifies key barriers such as caste-based microaggressions, gendered dropouts, disability bias, linguistic dominance, and the digital divide. It also highlights grassroots, decolonial alternatives like tribal-run schools, Dalit feminist curricula, and community radio. Ultimately, the chapter proposes a transformative framework inspired by Ambedkar's vision of social emancipation and Fraser's redistribution-recognition model. It argues for a shift from superficial inclusion to deep structural reform that centres subaltern voices in education policy, pedagogy, and practice.

***Keywords:** Educational Equity, Multilingualism, Inclusive Education, NEP 2020, Postcolonial Pedagogy*

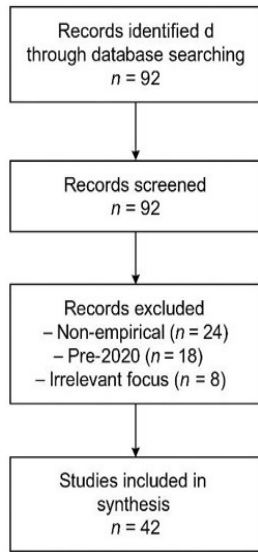
### **Introduction: Reframing Educational Justice in India**

Education in India reflects not just the immense sociocultural differences but also the intertwined structural inequality, which is strongly linked to caste stratification systems: Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), gender norms, handicap status, and the urban-rural divide. Despite NEP 2020's constitutional provisions and affirmative policies, empirical evidence reveals a diverging narrative. This chapter, hence, seeks to identify a critical research gap between progressive rhetoric and the reality on the ground.

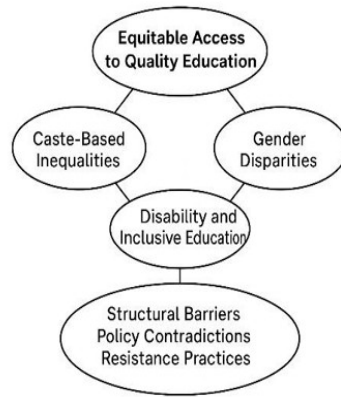
### **Equitable Access to Quality Education: A Systematic Review**

To facilitate the study, a desk-based review of PRISMA publications between 2020 and 2025 focused on educational access of disadvantaged groups in India were selected, with Figure 1,

outlining the screening process. Figure 2 reveals the three dominant categories that surfaced: (1) *Structural Barriers*, (2) *Policy Contradictions*, and (3) *Resistance Practices* (see Appendices), post-thematic coding using NVivo, yielding.



**Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart**  
 Source: Author’s work.



**Figure 2. Thematic Map**  
 Source: Author’s work.

### Caste and Gender Disparities

Empirical studies reveal that SC/ST students are often systematically excluded from meaningful participation in both academic and co-curricular life. Nayak (2023) discloses “microaggressions from teachers ranging from name-calling to differential expectations create hostile environments that undermine student confidence and retention” while government schools across Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, continue to segregate Dalit children during midday meals or made to clean classrooms as punishment (Nath, 2022). These exclusions, best understood through the Structural Violence framework (Galtung, 2018), reveal how educational access for Dalit and Adivasi learners is obstructed not just by poverty but by institutional practices that devalue their social identity. Another pressing concern is discrimination of girls in rural and conflict-affected regions, which exacerbates rising dropout rates, especially after puberty, in Dalit, tribal, and Muslim communities (ASER, 2023). Girls also have restricted participation in STEM and leadership

programs. Other key drivers include poor sanitation, gender-based violence, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage. Though mobile schools in areas like Chhattisgarh and Jammu & Kashmir show promise (Joshi et al., 2024), they lack systemic backing. While mainstream education remains shaped by patriarchal norms, it contradicts the liberal ideals of Feminist Pedagogy (hooks, 1994).

### **Disability and Inclusive Education**

Further to this, while India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 mandates inclusive education, implementation is inadequate and inconsistent. Gupta and Kaul (2024), note that several government schools lack basic infrastructure and treat disabled children as burdens, often pushing them toward institutional care. The Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) lens reveals that exclusion of participation stems from societal and institutional barriers rather than from individual impairment (Oliver, 1990, p. 115). These barriers include inaccessible language media (e.g., no materials in regional Braille scripts), low teacher awareness, and bureaucratic delays in obtaining disability certificates needed for enrolment benefits.

### **Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction: Grounding Policy in Praxis**

#### **Cognitive and Social Benefits**

Further to this, mother tongue has proven social and cognitive benefits among tribal and marginalised learners. A study by Mahapatra and Anderson (2023) documents how Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) programs in Odisha and Jharkhand, where tribal children learn in their native languages (Santhali, Mundari, and Kui), have led to better retention rates. Additionally, in Kerala, Malayalam-medium instruction and phased second-language introduction had resulted in higher retention rates (Nair & Mishra, 2024, pp. 121) unlike, in Uttar Pradesh, where alienating regional dialects like Bhojpuri or Awadhi in favour of mainstream Hindi or English exacerbated drop-out rates (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023, p. 106). Grounded in the Linguistic Human Rights framework by Skutnabb-Kangas (2013), this evidence suggests that denying inclusion of mother tongue (MT) constitutes to epistemic violence and cultural erasure.

#### **Policy Challenges and Contradictions**

Further to this, NEP 2020's support for MT instruction until Grade 5 is compromised by

elitist linguistic bias and conflicting policies. While Santhali-medium schools in Jharkhand and Odisha reveal positive outcomes (Chimirala et al., 2025), the expansion of English-medium in Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), continues to replicate colonial linguistic hierarchies.

Mahapatra and Anderson (2023) emphasise the resulting pedagogical incoherence, with teachers resisting MTB-MLE due to inadequate training, lack of resources in local languages, and ingrained preference for English as a symbol of upward mobility. Additionally, publishers prioritise English texts for profit, relegating tribal or regional scripts to a transitional role.

### **Digital Colonialism**

Additionally, the rapid digitalisation of education, during COVID-19 pandemic, has aggravated exclusion. In Delhi, less than 5% of children accessed the government's DIKSHA platform, due to device unavailability, poor connectivity, and irrelevant content (Ray & Chakravarty, 2025). Even when devices existed, gendered norms restricted access to girls, reinforcing digital patriarchy (ASER, 2021). This exemplifies *Digital Colonialism* (Adam, 2019), where edtech fortifies global hierarchies, cultural erasure and neoliberal pedagogies.

### **Land Displacement and Denying Subaltern Voices**

Field studies from Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh reveal that mining-induced displacements disrupts education by uprooting families (Negi & Azeez, 2022). Thematic findings of 14 studies reinforce these findings: loss of identity and peer networks, stigma in new schools and discontinuity of tribal-relevant curriculum (see Appendices). Furthermore, the dominance of English and Hindi in edtech platforms like DIKSHA and Byju's also reinforces language hierarchies. This draws on Phillipson's (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism* where edtech becomes a tool for perpetuating elite knowledge systems and suppressing vernacular literacies by marginalizing regional and tribal languages. Additionally, the exclusion of tribal languages from Indian education undermines students' cognitive agency and cultural identity. As at 2023, only 5% of tribal languages were represented in state curricula, despite the existence of over 750 spoken languages (Das, 2024). Initiatives like EMRS, though intended to uplift tribal learners, rely on monolingual instruction, resulting in high dropout rates and alienation (Dash, 2018). This exclusion can be analysed through Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), which stresses educational freedom for well-being, and Spivak's critique of epistemic violence, where subaltern

voices are denied the legitimacy to produce or define knowledge (Spivak, 2023).

### **Subaltern Resistance and Alternative Schooling**

In response to such alienation, counter-hegemonic interventions have emerged in Maharashtra and Jharkhand. Positive initiatives include community radio broadcasts in tribal languages, peer-led learning groups, and Bhil-managed schools that focus on ecological ethics and indigenous knowledge (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021; Gupta & Padel, 2019). Additionally, Dalit feminist scholars in Maharashtra have also created alternative curricula to challenge dominant caste narratives through poetry (Geetha and Chakravarti, 2024). While these democratize knowledge and pedagogy, systemic obstacles continue to cast its shadow (MHRD, 2022). Overcoming such complex obstacles, requires a radical transfer of authority. In states like Nagaland, Chhattisgarh, and Gujarat, tribal councils have initiated curriculum rooted on local myths, agroecology knowledge, and oral histories (Garcia, 2017). This marks a decolonial reclaiming of epistemic sovereignty that merits recognition and sustained support.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates a transformative vision grounded in inclusion, equity, and multilingualism, the ongoing marginalisation of SC/ST groups, disabled learners and tribal culture reveals a policy disconnect shaped by entrenched hierarchies. Hence, reimagining Indian education necessitates Ambedkar’s vision of social justice, alongside Fraser’s framework of redistribution and recognition, equitable access to resources while affirming the legitimacy of subaltern knowledge, languages, and identities (Gupta & Kaul, 2024).

### **References**

- [1] Adam, T. (2019). Digital neocolonialism and massive open online courses (MOOCs): colonial pasts and neoliberal futures. *Learning, Media and Technology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080//17439884.2019.1640740>
- [2] Annual Status of Education Report (ASER Centre). (2023). *Annual Status of Education Report*.
- [3] New Delhi. <https://asercentre.org/aser-2023-beyond-basics/>

- [4] ASER Centre. (2021). *Annual Status of Education Report: Rural*. New Delhi. <https://asercentre.org/asere-2021/>
- [5] Bandyopadhyay, S., Arina Bardhan, D., P., & Bhattacharyya, S. (2021). Bridging the Education Divide Using Social Technologies. *SpringerLink*. <https://doi.org/10.1007-978-981-33-6738-8>
- [6] [6738-8](https://doi.org/10.1007-978-981-33-6738-8)
- [7] Chimirala, U. M., Anuchuri, P. D., & Parulekar, S. J. (2025). Discourses and counter-discourses on learning poverty through NEP-2020 and Indian judiciary for the Indigenous/Tribal/Minority child. *Journal of Education Policy*, 40(1), 152–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2024.2339907>
- [8] Das, A. K. (2024). Documenting the Tribal and Indigenous Languages of India. *Journal of Scientometric Research*, 13(3), 935–936. <https://doi.org/10.5530/jscires.20040868>
- [9] Dash, N. (2018). Educational Status of Tribal Children in Ekalavya Model Residential Schools in English Language: Strengths, Concerns and Challenges of Implementation. *ResearchGate*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15327.69283>
- [10] <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15327.69283>
- [11] Galtung, J. (2018). Violência, paz e pesquisa para a paz. *Organicom*, 15(28), 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2238-2593.organicom.2018.150546>
- [12] Garcia, S. (2017). Infusing Tribal Curriculum into K-12 Schools: A Case Study of Oregon’s Native American Educational Policies.
- [13] [https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/1794/22788/1/Garcia\\_oregon\\_0171A\\_11788.pdf](https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/1794/22788/1/Garcia_oregon_0171A_11788.pdf)
- [14] [11788.pdf](https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/1794/22788/1/Garcia_oregon_0171A_11788.pdf)
- [15] Geetha, V., & Chakravarti, U. (2024). *Feminist and Anticaste Pedagogies*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003482383>
- [16] Gupta, M., & Kaul, S. (2024). AI in Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review of Opportunities and Challenges in the Indian Context. *MIER Journal of Educational Studies Trends & Practices*, 429–461. <https://doi.org/10.52634/mier/2024/v14/i2/2702>
- [17] Gupta, M., & Padel, F. (2019). Indigenous Knowledge and Value Systems in India: Holistic Analysis of Tribal Education and the Challenge of Decentralising Control.

- Shifting Perspectives in Tribal Studies*, 67–86. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8090-7\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8090-7_4)
- [18] hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-to-Transgress-Education-as-the-Practice-of-Freedom/hooks/p/book/9780415908085?srsItd=AfmBOorgBGUu-CgbVF17bPE6RjEDDupayynaG4Mutzfi4Zgw-zZ-U9AC>
- [19] [Freedom/hooks/p/book/9780415908085?srsItd=AfmBOorgBGUu-CgbVF17bPE6RjEDDupayynaG4Mutzfi4Zgw-zZ-U9AC](https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-to-Transgress-Education-as-the-Practice-of-Freedom/hooks/p/book/9780415908085?srsItd=AfmBOorgBGUu-CgbVF17bPE6RjEDDupayynaG4Mutzfi4Zgw-zZ-U9AC)
- [20] [CgbVF17bPE6RjEDDupayynaG4Mutzfi4Zgw-zZ-U9AC](https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-to-Transgress-Education-as-the-Practice-of-Freedom/hooks/p/book/9780415908085?srsItd=AfmBOorgBGUu-CgbVF17bPE6RjEDDupayynaG4Mutzfi4Zgw-zZ-U9AC)
- [21] Joshi, K., Kumar, R., Salil Bharany, Kumar, D., Kumar, R., Ibrahim, A. O., Abdelzahir Abdelmaboud, Wamda Nagmeldin, & Medani, M. A. (2024). Exploring the Connectivity Between Education 4.0 and Classroom 4.0: Technologies, Student Perspectives, and Engagement in the Digital Era. *IEEE*: <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=10412043>
- [22] *IEEE*: <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=10412043>
- [23] 12, 24179–24204. <https://doi.org/10.1109/access.2024.3357786>
- [24] Mahapatra, S. K., & Anderson, J. (2023). Languages for learning: a framework for implementing
- [25] India’s multilingual language-in-education policy. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 24(1), 102–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2022.2037292>
- [26] MHRD. (2022). *Educational Statistics at a Glance*. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/ESAG-2018.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/ESAG-2018.pdf)
- [27] [2018.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/ESAG-2018.pdf)
- [28] Nair, K., & Mishra, P. (2024). What Matters in Choosing School for Children’s Education?
- [29] Experiences from Kottayam, Kerala. *Review of Development and Change*, 29(1), 106–
- [30] 128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09722661241259212>
- [31] Nath, S. (2022). *Democracy and Social Cleavage in India: Ethnography of Riots, Everyday Politics and Communalism in West Bengal c. 2012–2021*. Routledge India.

- <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003273516>
- [32] Nayak, S. (2023). Caste in Schools: Experiences of Dalit Children. *Caste in Everyday Life*, 83–
- [33] 106. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30655-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30655-6_4)
- [34] Negi, D. P., & Azeez, E. P. A. (2022). Impacts of Development Induced Displacement on the Tribal Communities of India: An Integrative Review. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1420>
- [35] Oliver, M. (1990). The Politics of Disablement — New Social Movements. *The Politics of Disablement*, 112–131. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20895-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20895-1_8)
- [36] Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford University Press. [https://research.cbs.dk/files/46780458/robert\\_phillipson\\_native\\_speakers\\_publishersversi](https://research.cbs.dk/files/46780458/robert_phillipson_native_speakers_publishersversi)
- [37] [on.pdf](#) Ray Chaudhury, A., & Sinha, M. (2022). Capturing Regional Disparity in Educational Transition in India: A Sequential Logit Based Transitional Probability Analysis. *Social Indicators Research*, 164(2), 893–928. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-022-02979-6>
- [38] Ray, S., & Chakravarty, S. (2025). Innovative initiatives to improve access to education in urban slums: A critical review of mobile school education programs. *Cities*, 159, 105748– 105748. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105748>
- [39] Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press. [http://www.c3l.uni-](http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/cde/OMDE625/Sen/Sen-intro.pdf)
- [40] [oldenburg.de/cde/OMDE625/Sen/Sen-intro.pdf](http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/cde/OMDE625/Sen/Sen-intro.pdf)
- [41] Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2013). *Linguistic genocide in education--or worldwide diversity and human rights?*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605191>
- [42] Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In *Imperialism* (pp. 171–219). Routledge. <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf>