

The Mirage of Inclusivity: An Intersectional Audit of Girls' Education in NEP 2020

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Abstract:

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, as the majestic blueprint for making India a "global knowledge superpower," places a significant rhetorical emphasis on equity and inclusion. Through the introduction of "Gender Inclusion Fund" (GIF) and categorization of marginalized communities under the umbrella of "Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups" (SEDGs), the policy aims to mitigate historical disparities. However, this research paper argues that the NEP 2020's approach, while acknowledging gender, largely operates within a single-axis framework that fails to adequately address the complex, intersectional realities of caste, religion, region, and disability. By employing an intersectional lens, this study dissects the policy's key provisions — including school consolidation, privatization, digital education, and the SEDG grouping. The analysis draws upon extensive data from UDISE+, AISHE 2021-22, and ASER 2023, alongside critical scholarship from domain experts like Anita Rampal and Jandhyala Tilak. The findings reveal that the policy's structural reforms, such as the push for "School Complexes" and public-philanthropic partnerships, risk exacerbating the "double jeopardy" faced by Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim girls. The paper concludes that without disaggregated, targeted interventions that address the specific socio-political vulnerabilities of distinct groups — particularly the alarming dropout rates among Muslim girls and the digital exclusion of rural adolescents — the NEP's vision of inclusivity will remain an elusive mirage.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, Intersectionality, Girls' Education, SEDGs, Gender Inclusion Fund, Digital Divide, Caste-Gender Matrix, Privatization.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Policy Context: From 1986 to 2020

India's Union Cabinet approved the National Education Policy (NEP) in July 2020 and sweeping aside the long run of the 1986 old National Policy on Education. The new policy wants an education system rooted in India's realities; something that'll help transform the country into a fair, vibrant, knowledge-driven society (MHRD, 2020). Unlike its predecessor, which operated in a pre-digital, pre-liberalization era (notwithstanding the 1992 modifications), the NEP 2020 is situated within a rapidly globalizing economy, a digitized social fabric, and an increasingly stratified demographic landscape.

The policy promises "Equitable and Inclusive Education" as one of its fundamental pillars. It says, basically, "no child should be left behind in terms of educational opportunity because of their background and socio-cultural identities" (MOE, 2023). It introduces structural changes such as the 5+3+3+4 curricular design, the consolidation of schools into "complexes," and a renewed focus on vocational and digital learning (MHRD, 2020).

1.2 The Problem Statement: Gender as a Monolith?

While the NEP 2020 is replete with the vocabulary of inclusion, critical policy analysts argue that its conceptualization of "gender" remains largely additive rather than intersectional. The policy has introduced the concept of "Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups" in order to bring various identities

under its ambit: gender, caste, tribe and disability (Chandel & Verma 2024). While this aggregation simplifies administrative targeting, it simultaneously risks flattening the unique, compounded disadvantages faced by individuals who inhabit multiple marginalized categories simultaneously.

For instance, the educational trajectory of an upper-caste, urban girl is markedly different from that of a Dalit girl in a rural hamlet, or a Muslim girl in a peri-urban ghetto. The former may face patriarchal restrictions on career choices, while the latter faces systemic caste-based exclusion, economic deprivation, and the threat of communal violence. By treating “girls” as a primary category and “SEDGs” as a broad bucket, the policy potentially obscures the specific machinations of power that operate at the intersections.

1.3 Research Questions

This research paper tries to evaluate the National Education Policy 2020 critically, using the theoretical framework of intersectionality with a purpose of answering the following questions:

1. How well does the NEP 2020’s conceptualization of SEDGs and the Gender Inclusion Fund address or fail to address intersectional marginalities?
2. What are the implications of structural reforms — specifically school complexes and privatization — on the access and safety of girls from marginalized caste and religious backgrounds?
3. To what extent does the “digital turn” in the policy reinforce existing gender and class hierarchies?
4. Does the empirical evidence (UDISE+, ASER) support the policy’s claims of inclusivity, or does it point to widening fissures?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Intersectionality in the Indian Context

Intersectionality was a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1989) and contains that there are multiple axes of social stratification including class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability and gender which do not operate in isolation but in mutual interrelation. In the Indian context, this analytical lens has been adapted by scholars for the interrogation of the triadic configuration of caste, gender and religion (Khanna and Mukherjee 2024; Pandey 2025). While, in the Western formulations, race and gender figure as key structuring categories, caste in India is a rigid system of graded inequality which, among other functions, helps to regulate female sexuality for the maintenance of the purity of caste. Feminist scholars like Nivedita Menon ease that “Dalit patriarchy” and “Brahmanical patriarchy” manifest differently, thus making a case for having a gender sensitization policy that is one-size-fits-all. Accordingly, Dalit and Adivasi women are victims of “double jeopardy” (Sarkar et al., 2025). Empirical scholarship suggests that woman from Schedule Caste or Schedule Tribes communities have the lowest levels of aspirations and expectations in all demographic groups which is a consequence of cumulative disadvantage (Sarkar et al., 2025).

2.2 The Debate on “Socio-economically Disadvantaged Groups” (SEDGs)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings together the identities of gender like female and transgender, socio-cultural identities like SC, ST, OBC, minorities, geographical identities and disabilities and makes them one: SEDGs (Chandel & Verma, 2024; Press Information Bureau, 2022). Proponents argue that this consolidation of affirmative action helps to streamline affirmative action and avoid creating resource fragmentation. Critics - including Rampal and scholars from the Centre for Social Development - attack the constitution of such grouping because they say constitutional guarantees specifically accorded to the SCs and STs tend to be diluted. By subsuming “minorities” under a more comprehensive category of “geographical identities”, the political nature of religious marginalization becomes depoliticized due to its historical roots (Kumar, 2021). This “homogenous approach” ignores the role of intersectionality and thus hides the unique barriers of, for instance, a Muslim girl being in a conflict-prone area or a boy in a remote village (Kumar, 2021).

2.3 Privatization and the Gendered Economy of Schooling

The scholarship on privatization in Indian education highlights a distinct gender bias. Research by Jandhyala Tilak and others suggests that when families have to pay for education, they prioritize sons.

Girls are disproportionately relegated to government schools, while boys are sent to private schools (Tilak, 2015 & 2020). This phenomenon, known as the “private-schooling gender gap,” implies that any policy promoting privatization or Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) will inevitably hurt girls' access to quality resources. The NEP's encouragement of “philanthropic” involvement and “alternative models” is seen by critics as a retreat of the state, which disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable girls (Iversen & Begue, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a **Critical Policy Analysis (CPA)** approach, which interrogates public policy not merely as a technical text but as a discourse that allocates values and resources. The analysis relies on triangulation of three distinct data streams:

1. **Policy Text Analysis:** A close reading of the official NEP 2020 document (MHRD, 2020) and subsequent operational guidelines (e.g., Samagra Shiksha 2.0, Guidelines on School Safety) (MOE, 2023 & 2021).
2. **Quantitative Data Analysis:** Examination of large-scale datasets to identify trends in enrollment, dropout, and transition rates.
 - **UDISE+ (2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23):** For school-level data on dropout rates and infrastructure (RAJYA SABHA, 2024).
 - **AISHE (2021-22):** For higher education enrollment trends among SC, ST, and Muslim women (AISHE, 2022).
 - **Annual Status of Education Report, 2023:** For data on access of digital contents/materials, class and foundational skills of 14 — 18-year-olds (RAM, 2024).
3. **Secondary Qualitative Literature:** Review of academic papers, civil society reports (Oxfam India, Save the Children), and expert commentaries (Economic and Political Weekly, Contemporary Education Dialogue) to understand the sociological impact of policy decisions (Burra, 2001).

4. THE ARCHITECTURE OF EXCLUSION: STRUCTURAL REFORMS AND THE GIRL CHILD

The NEP 2020 proposes sweeping structural changes to the school system. While intended to improve efficiency and resource sharing, an intersectional analysis reveals that these changes may compromise the physical and social safety of marginalized girls.

4.1 The School Complex System: Efficiency vs. Access

The policy recommends the creation of “School Complexes,” which consolidate smaller, neighborhood schools into larger administrative units to share resources like libraries, laboratories, and teachers (NCERT, n.d.). This follows the logic of “rationalization” of suboptimal schools.

Critique: The closure or merger of neighborhood schools has a devastating impact on girls' education.

- **Distance and Safety:** In rural India, distance is a primary proxy for safety. Parents are reluctant to send post-pubescent daughters to schools that require travel through secluded areas or dominant-caste habitations due to the fear of sexual harassment and violence (Sardar & Manikanta Paria, 2024).
- **Evidence from States:** Studies on school mergers in Odisha, Rajasthan, and Telangana demonstrate that when primary and upper-primary schools are merged or moved, dropout rates for girls and Dalit/Adivasi children spike (Bansal et al., n.d; Behera, 2022).
- **The Intersectional Impact:** A Dalit girl walking to a distant “School Complex” faces not just the general threat of gender-based violence but specific caste-based harassment. The NEP's assurance of “transport facilities” is often viewed with skepticism, given the poor track record of implementation in rural transport schemes (Shrivastav & Nirmla, 2025).

4.2 Public-Philanthropic Partnerships (PPPs) and the Retreat of the State

The NEP 2020 actively encourages “alternative models of education” and invites “non-governmental philanthropic organizations” to build schools (MHRD, 2020). It proposes a “light but tight” regulatory framework to facilitate this.

Critique: This signals a move towards the privatization of public education.

- **Economic Exclusion:** As noted by Tilak (2020), privatization in India creates a quasi-market model (Tilak, 2015). In a patriarchal society, when education incurs a cost (even indirect costs in “low-fee” private schools), families divest from daughters.
- **The “Son Preference” Effect:** UDISE+ and household surveys consistently show that boys are overrepresented in private schools, while girls are clustered in government schools. By shifting focus to PPPs, the state risks creating a two-tier system where girls are left in underfunded public remnants while boys access the better-resourced private/partnership schools (Iversen & Begue, 2017).
- **Lack of Accountability:** Philanthropic schools often escape the rigorous scrutiny of constitutional affirmative action (reservations for SC/ST/OBC). A Dalit girl’s right to admission and non-discrimination is more robustly protected in a state school than in a “philanthropic” partnership school, where management may have implicit biases (Rangarajan et al., 2023).

5. THE “SEDG” UMBRELLA: AN INTERSECTIONAL DISSECTION

The NEP 2020’s reliance on the SEDG category is its primary mechanism for inclusion. However, data reveals that “disadvantage” is not uniform. The policy’s failure to disaggregate these groups leads to the invisibility of the most vulnerable.

5.1 The Crisis of the Muslim Girl

The most glaring silence in the NEP 2020 is regarding the specific educational crisis of Muslims in India. While the policy mentions “minorities,” it lacks targeted interventions for a community facing rapid educational decline.

Data Analysis (UDISE+ & AISHE):

Let’s look at the numbers. At the secondary level (Class 10), the dropout rate for Muslim students shot up to 24.4% in 2021-22, from 14.5% the year before (TNN, 2024). That’s way above the national average and other groups. In higher education, Muslim enrollment dropped by 8.5% in 2020-21 (Maitri Porecha, 2023).

- **The Intersectional Barrier:** Muslim girls face a unique set of barriers:
 1. **Communal Violence & Security:** The “ghettoization” of the community due to fears of communal violence makes distance to school a non-negotiable barrier. If a school is not in the immediate neighborhood, Muslim girls are withdrawn (De, 2025; Begum, 2020).
 2. **Cultural/Religious Specificity:** The lack of Urdu-medium instruction and the stigmatization of cultural markers (hijab) in “secular” spaces contribute to alienation. The NEP’s silence on Urdu and the push for “Indian knowledge systems” (often interpreted as Sanskritized) may deepen this alienation (Singh, 2021).

5.2 The Dalit and Adivasi Paradox: High Enrollment, Low Retention

For SC and ST girls, the challenge has shifted from enrollment to retention and “epistemic access.”

- **Enrollment Gains:** AISHE 2021–22 shows SC female enrollment in higher education increased to **31.71 lakh** (AISHE, 2022).
- **The “Double Jeopardy”:** Despite enrollment, Schedule Caste or Schedule Tribes women have the minimum levels of expectation and hopes or aspiration for employment (Sarkar et al., 2025). This is attributed to the “double jeopardy” of caste and gender — discrimination in the labor market discourages educational persistence.
- **The KGBV Solution:** The NEP’s upgrade of KGBVs to Class 12 is a critical intervention here. Since KGBVs specifically target SC/ST/OBC/Minority girls in backward blocks, extending them to Class 12 directly addresses the secondary dropout cliff (Department of School Education & Literacy

[DoSEL], 2022). However, the pace is slow: only 2,010 KGBVs were approved for Class 6-12 upgrade by 2023, leaving thousands of schools capping at Class 8 (MOE, 2023).

Table 1: Dropout Rates and Enrollment Trends by Social Category (2021-22)

Social Category	Indicator	Statistic	Trend/Insight	Source
Muslim	Sec. Dropout Rate	24.40%	Sharp Increase (Crisis point)	(TNN, 2024)
SC Female	Higher Ed Enrollment	31.71 Lakh	Increasing (Positive access)	(AISHE, 2021-22)
ST Total	Higher Ed Enrollment	27.1 Lakh	Increasing	(AISHE, 2021-22)
General	Gender Parity Index	1.01	Females > Males in Higher Ed	(British Council, 2021)

Insight: The aggregate Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.01 hides the severe crisis among Muslim minorities, validating the intersectional critique that “Gender Parity” does not equal social equity.

5.3 The Transgender Child: A Step Forward?

The inclusion of “transgender” children within SEDGs and the Gender Inclusion Fund is a historic first (Kattimani, n.d.).

- **Enrollment:** UDISE+ 2019-20 recorded 61,214 transgender children (PIB, 2022).
- **Critique:** While recognized, the policy places them in the same “fund” as girls. Given the distinct needs of transgender children (safe washrooms, anti-bullying protocols, uniform flexibility), the lack of a dedicated, ring-fenced budget raises concerns that their needs will be subsumed under general “girls’ welfare” (Kattimani, n.d; Ranjan, 2025).

6. THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: THE NEW GENDERED FRONTIER

Digital education is highly encouraged by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which suggests the establishment of the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), as well as development of online learning infrastructure like DIKSHA (MHRD, 2020; Thekkumbad, 2025). Technology is, nevertheless, a gendered tool in the situation of rural India.

6.1 Findings from ASER 2023 'Beyond Basics'

The ASER 2023 report focuses on 14 – 18-year-olds, the target demographic for the NEP’s secondary stage. The findings dismantle the assumption of universal digital access.

- **Ownership Gap:** Males are over two times (43.7%) as likely to own a smartphone compared to females (19.8%) (Hassan, 2024).
- **Skill Gap:** While 70% of youth could use a smartphone, boys significantly outperformed girls in functional tasks.
 - **Google Maps:** Boys were far more proficient in using maps. This is not just a technical skill; it correlates with **mobility**. In rural India, boys are allowed to travel; girls are confined. Therefore, girls do not learn navigation skills (Annual States of Education Report [ASER] Centre, 2024).
 - **Online Safety:** Girls showed lower awareness of safety settings (blocking profiles), making them more vulnerable to cyber harassment (Arthan, 2024)

6.2 The Gatekeeping of Technology

Qualitative reports suggest that in rural households, the smartphone is often the father’s device. Access for girls is heavily policed due to “reputational anxieties” and the fear of “transgressive” behavior (e.g., inter-caste romances initiated online) (Sen & Kalita, 2025).

- **Policy Blind Spot:** The NEP 2020 does not explicitly mandate the distribution of free devices to girls. It speaks of “digital libraries” and “content.” Without individual ownership, “online education” for a girl means dependence on male relatives, which is often denied. This turns the digital classroom into an exclusionary space (Sen & Kalita, 2025; Chadha, 2020)

Table 2: Digital Inequality Matrix (ASER 2023-24)

Metric	Boys (14 to 18 Years)	Girls (14 to 18 Years)	Intersectional Implication	Source
Smartphone Ownership	43.70%	19.80%	Economic + Patriarchal control over assets	(Hasan, 2024)
Can use Google Maps	High Proficiency	Low Proficiency	Correlates with restrictions on physical mobility	(ASER Centre, 2024)
Online Transactions	Higher	Lower	Financial independence gap	(ASER Centre, 2024)
Social media Access	Higher	Lower	Unequal access to information networks	(Hasan, 2024)

7. MECHANISMS OF REDRESS: THE FUND FOR INCLUSION OF GENDER IN NEP 2020

The Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) is the NEP's primary financial instrument to address these disparities.

- **Scope:** It targets priorities like sanitation, bicycles, and conditional cash transfers (Devi, n.d.).
- **Implementation Status:** As of 2023, the fund is operationalized through Samagra Shiksha 2.0. However, critics argue that the fund lacks a statutory basis. Unlike the "Special Component Plan" for SCs (which was a budgetary mandate), the GIF is discretionary.
- **Success Stories vs. Systemic Gaps:** States like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have utilized funds for innovative schemes (e.g., *Nan Mudhalvan*), but in states with lower administrative capacity (where gender gaps are widest), utilization remains opaque (Ranjan, 2025; Kollegeapply, 2025).
- **Critique:** A "fund" cannot substitute for "rights." The NEP's language shifts from the "Rights-based framework" of the RTE Act 2009 to a "Welfare/Fund-based" framework. Rights are justiciable; funds are subject to fiscal availability. For a girl denied admission, a "fund" offers less legal recourse than a "Right to Education" (Khaitan, 2020).

8. DISCUSSION: THE INTERSECTION OF POLICY AND PATRIARCHY

The analysis reveals that the NEP 2020 operates on a fundamental contradiction. It seeks to modernize education through privatization, digitization, and consolidation—all mechanisms that, in the Indian context, historically exclude the marginalized girl child.

1. The "Safety vs. Access" Trade-off: By promoting School Complexes, the policy prioritizes administrative efficiency. However, for a Muslim or Dalit girl, "access" is defined by safety. A distant school is an inaccessible school. The policy fails to weigh the sociological cost of distance against the economic benefit of consolidation.

2. The Invisible "Hidden Curriculum": While the policy speaks of "gender sensitization" in textbooks, it is silent on the caste-patriarchal culture of the classroom itself. As noted by Anita Rampal, using terms like "gender neutral" can sometimes obfuscate the power dynamics that need to be challenged (Roshni, 2022). A truly intersectional policy would mandate anti-discrimination audits specifically for caste and religion in every school.

3. The Myth of Digital Meritocracy: The digital push is perhaps the most dangerous for gender equity. It threatens to create a new class of "digital outcastes" - girls who technically have a school but cannot access the digital layer where learning now resides.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The massive ambition of the NEP, 2020 is a document that is still haunted by the specters of the country's stratified society. Through the prism of intersectionality, the policy appears as a "mirage of inclusivity" - promising water to the thirsty but offering structural reforms that may push the oasis further away.

The creation of SEDGs and the GIF are positive acknowledgments of disparity, but they are insufficient to counter the structural violence of caste, the political alienation of religious minorities, and the

patriarchal gatekeeping of technology. The upgrading of KGBVs is the policy's strongest gender intervention, but its slow implementation threatens to leave a generation of girls behind.

Recommendations:

1. **Disaggregate SEDG Data:** The Ministry of Education must track dropout and learning outcomes separately for Muslim girls, Dalit girls, and Transgender children to enable targeted, not generic, interventions.
2. **Moratorium on School Mergers:** Halting the closure of neighborhood schools in tribal, hill, and minority-concentrated areas is essential to ensure physical safety and access.
3. **Digital Entitlement for Girls:** The Gender Inclusion Fund should be specifically utilized to provide personal digital devices and data plans to adolescent girls in government schools to bypass household gatekeeping.
4. **Strengthen Public Provisioning:** A renewed commitment to the "Common School System" is necessary to arrest the flight of resources to the private sector, which invariably disadvantages the girl child.

Only by recognizing that a girl's identity is not singular, but a complex intersection of history, power, and privilege, can the NEP 2020 truly fulfill its promise of educating India's daughters.

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