Ensuring Inclusive Higher Education: A Roadmap For Equity and Access- A Study

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
National Education Policy 2020, Higher Education, Equity, Inclusive Indian Education System.	This study delves into the imperative task of ensuring inclusive higher education, presenting a comprehensive roadmap designed to promote equity and broaden access. The article explores the multifaceted challenges faced by socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) in pursuing advanced education. Drawing from the National Education Policy of 2020, the study outlines specific measures for both governments and higher education institutions (HEIs). From earmarking funds to enhancing gender balance and fostering inclusivity in admissions, the study examines nuanced strategies to address barriers unique to higher education. The article also emphasizes the role of technology, outreach programs, and the development of supportive mechanisms to uplift students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through an in-depth analysis of policy initiatives, the study contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on creating a more inclusive and accessible higher education landscape. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar "Knowledge is the basis of human life. To enhance the intellectual capacity of the students, every effort should be made to increase their intelligence."

INTRODUCTION

Education is a systematic process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and habits. It is a lifelong journey that encompasses formal instruction, informal learning, and experiential knowledge. Education aims to foster intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development in individuals, preparing them to contribute to society and lead fulfilling lives.Formal education typically takes place in schools, colleges, and universities, where structured curricula are designed to impart a wide range of subjects and disciplines. Informal education occurs through daily life experiences, interactions with others, and self-directed learning. The goals of education often include the development of critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, creativity, and a sense of social responsibility.Education is not limited to academic knowledge; it also involves the cultivation of ethical values, cultural awareness, and personal character. The methods of education have evolved over time, adapting to technological advancements, societal changes, and the diverse needs of learners. Ultimately, education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals and societies by equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary for personal growth and contributing to the betterment of the world.

Higher education refers to advanced learning and training beyond the secondary education level, typically provided by colleges, universities, and other institutions of higher learning. It is a level of education that goes beyond the basics and focuses on specialized knowledge and skills in various academic and professional fields. Higher education is characterized by a greater depth of study, more specialized instruction, and an emphasis on research, critical thinking, and independent learning.Higher education institutions play a crucial role in shaping individuals into well-rounded and knowledgeable professionals. These institutions offer a range of degree programs, including undergraduate and graduate levels. At the undergraduate level, students typically pursue Bachelor's degrees, while Master's and Doctoral degrees are available at the graduate level. This structured progression allows learners to delve deeper into their chosen fields.

One distinctive feature of higher education is the opportunity for specialization. Students can focus their studies on specific disciplines or fields, gaining in-depth knowledge and expertise. This specialization not only hones their skills but also prepares them for specialized roles in their future careers.Research and innovation are fundamental aspects of higher education. Institutions actively engage in research activities, contributing to the advancement of knowledge across various fields. This commitment to research fosters intellectual growth and discovery, creating a dynamic learning environment for both students and faculty.Critical thinking and analytical skills are emphasized in higher education. Students are challenged to think independently, analyze information critically, and solve complex problems. This focus on critical thinking prepares graduates to navigate the challenges of their chosen professions and adapt to evolving landscapes.Moreover, higher education serves as a platform for professional development. Many programs are

specifically designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge required for specific careers. Professional degrees in fields such as law, medicine, business, or engineering are common, providing a direct pathway to professions that demand specialized expertise.In addition to academic growth, higher education promotes a global perspective. Institutions expose students to diverse cultures, ideas, and perspectives, fostering an understanding of the interconnectedness of the world. Many universities actively encourage international collaboration and offer exchange programs, enriching the educational experience and preparing students for a globalized workforce. In essence, higher education is a transformative journey that not only imparts knowledge but also cultivates critical thinking, specialization, research skills, and a global outlook.

Gender inequality in higher education is a significant issue in India, although there have been some positive changes in recent years. Traditionally, there has been a disparity between men and women in terms of access to education, and this is reflected in higher education as well.Gender inequality in higher education in India is influenced by various factors. In many rural areas, girls encounter barriers to accessing primary and secondary education, resulting in a smaller pool of eligible female students for higher education. Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes often limit girls' educational aspirations, with families prioritizing boys' education or expressing safety concerns for girls pursuing higher studies. Early marriage and parenthood interrupt girls' education, as societal expectations push them towards family responsibilities at a young age. Economic constraints also contribute, with families facing financial difficulties favoring the education of male members, limiting the number of girls pursuing higher education.

Additionally, a lack of educational infrastructure in some areas, including inadequate transportation and safety concerns, further discourages girls from pursuing education. Discrimination within educational institutions, marked by gender bias, harassment, and insufficient support services, creates an unwelcome environment for female students. Moreover, women's limited representation in STEM fields perpetuates gender imbalances in higher education, as societal expectations and stereotypes discourage girls from pursuing careers in these areas. Efforts to address these challenges include initiatives promoting gender inclusivity, scholarships for girls, and awareness campaigns to create a more equitable educational landscape in India. The draft made under the chairmanship of Dr.K.Kasturirangan analysis these difficulties and also said mention how the NEP-2020(National Education Policy -2020) how to handle it. This article briefly say about the what are the recommendations need to exclusive the problems and how make the education more equity and inclusive.

SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS (SEDGs):

First, we know that SEDGs (Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups) are social and economic development goals (SEDGs) that may be systematically classified according to gender identities, with a specific focus on females and transgender individuals. Additionally, these goals can be delineated based on socio-cultural identities, encompassing categories such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and minority groups. Furthermore, geographical identities play a crucial role in the classification of SEDGs, including students hailing from villages and small towns. In the NEP-2020 discussed in the draft to improve the SC, ST, and OBC, they are specially notified in the draft to improve their education. These are both men and women who fall under the categories and are notified in the draft at point 14.4.2 of the steps taken by the government[1].There are several steps we will take, especially point A in 14.4.2, which is most welcome. There are practically no problems for the students that fall under the SEDGs. At that point, they said, "Mitigate opportunity costs and fees for pursuing higher education." These are the student's economic problems. The point of higher education fees is to be reduced. But there must be clarification on how marginalized groups can benefit. Yes There is a must-have problem for SEDG students economically, especially those pursuing higher education. That is the economic problem. The NEP-2020 allocates 20% free seats and 30% half fees for the students[2].Who come from the merit poor? The main thing is how it will be effectively established. The government will want to make sure of it. But this thing definitely improves the GER of the SEDG students, especially the women. But there is need of focus on the Transgender comes under the SEDGs. There must be a special focus on them. They are the most backward socially and economically in a society. And there are a minority of people who only get education and employment. According to 2011 censes only 56.1% only gets education[3].

BRIDGING GAPS AND STRENGTHENING EXISTING MEASURES:

The point the **14.4.2 b) "Provide more financial assistance and scholarships to socio-economically**

disadvantaged students" the providing funds like the ICSSR (Indian council of Social Science Research), ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) , SC,ST scholarship are the more efficient the scholarship give that is increases the GER and also great helpful in Research but there should all that already is there . New funds to be given to students it will boost them.But maximum funds are given through direct bank accounts of students and researchers but are not this makes them in trouble due to many procedures. Liberalization in procedures makes them more useful. The point the **14.4.2 (c) Conduct outreach on higher education opportunities and scholarships**bridging the gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes for children belonging to Scheduled Castes remains a primary goal. Special attention is also required for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), identified based on historical social and educational backwardness. The ongoing interventions will persist, accompanied by the introduction of specific mechanisms to ensure that children from tribal communities benefit from these initiatives. Additionally, minorities, who are underrepresented in school and higher education, will receive targeted interventions to promote education. The students who are under the OBCs category they were get scholarships at the less they need to get scholarships on the basis of the creamy layer and non- creamy layer category. Like the other scholarships.

INCLUSIVE THE HIGHER EDUCATION:

In the points of **14.4.2 (d) Make admissions processes more inclusive, (e) Make curriculum more inclusive, (f) Increase employability potential of higher education programmes.**The NetajiSubhash Chandra Bose AwasiyaVidyalayas and Hostels incorporate gender inclusiveness by implementing specific provisions. Additionally, there is a dedicated initiative named Rani LaxmiBaiAtmarakshaPrashikshan, focusing on providing self-defense training exclusively to girls. Another program, the Swami Vivekanand Single Girl Child Fellowship for Research in Social Science, aims to support and encourage research endeavors among female scholars.Furthermore, the PG Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Children serves as an essential initiative, fostering higher education opportunities for single girls. The stipend for Children with Special Needs (CWSN) girls encompasses 91,318 beneficiaries who receive support under the Home-Based Education program, ensuring educational access for children with special needs without altering the intended meaning.[4].The inclusion of LGBTQ communities in India's educational landscape has seen significant strides, with the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 marking a groundbreaking moment by explicitly addressing "Education for Transgender" individuals. Additionally, the Transgender Persons Rights Act (2020), proposed by the National Council for Transgender Persons, has further underscored the commitment to inclusivity. Notably, the initiative includes a commendable 25 percent reservation for transgender children in educational institutions, reflecting a tangible effort to ensure equal opportunities. The impact of these measures is evident in the enrollment figures, with the academic year 2019-20 witnessing a total of 61,214 transgender children in schools. Among them, 5,813 and 4,798 transgender students were enrolled in Class X and Class XII, respectively. Furthermore, in a significant achievement, 25 transgender students successfully cleared the 10th and 12th CBSE board examinations in 2020, showcasing the positive outcomes of these inclusive policies.[4]

DIVYANG STUDENTS:

Students referred to as "Divyang" are those requiring special education. These individuals may experience various impairments, including learning disorders, visual or hearing impairments, among others. Their unique needs necessitate support, which can be provided by educators specifically trained in addressing such challenges.[5]**14.4.2 (h) "Ensure all buildings and facilities are wheelchair-accessible and disabled-friendly".**[1]This policy recognizes the significance of establishing enabling mechanisms to provide children with special needs, also known as Divyang or CWSN, the same educational opportunities as their peers. This comprehensive approach aims to create an inclusive and equitable educational environment for all.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, the NEP-2020 explicitly acknowledges the need for inclusive education by recognizing the specific requirements of diverse learner groups. It emphasizes the importance of accommodating learners with varying abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, and those belonging to marginalized communities. This recognition is a pivotal step towards creating an educational environment that caters to the diverse needs of the population.In addition, the policy places a significant focus on early childhood care and education, recognizing the formative years as crucial for a child's overall development. By emphasizing the importance of foundational literacy and numeracy, the NEP aims to bridge the learning gaps and reduce disparities in

educational outcomes from the early stages of a child's education. Furthermore, the NEP-2020 proposes the establishment of a Gender Inclusion Fund to address gender-based disparities in education. This fund is designed to support initiatives that promote the participation and retention of girls and transgender students in the educational system. By explicitly addressing the unique challenges faced by these groups, the policy strives to create a more inclusive educational landscape. Moreover, the NEP-2020 envisions the establishment of special education zones in disadvantaged regions to ensure that quality education is accessible to all, irrespective of geographical location. This decentralized approach aims to address regional disparities in educational infrastructure and resources. In terms of policy implementation, the NEP-2020 underscores the importance of leveraging technology to facilitate inclusive education. The integration of digital resources and online learning platforms is viewed as a means to reach remote and underserved communities, thereby enhancing access to educational opportunities. To further strengthen inclusive practices, the NEP-2020 recommends the development of a comprehensive curriculum framework that incorporates diverse perspectives, cultures, and histories. This inclusive curriculum is envisioned to foster a sense of belonging and identity among students from varied backgrounds. In conclusion, the NEP-2020's emphasis on inclusive and equitable education is manifested through its nuanced features that address the diverse needs of the population. However, effective implementation and establishment of these policies require meticulous planning, resource allocation, and continuous evaluation. To optimize the impact of the NEP-2020, the government should prioritize efficient policy implementation, engage stakeholders at all levels, and invest in capacity building for educators to ensure the realization of a truly inclusive and equitable education system.

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