



BRIDGING THE EDUCATIONAL DIVIDE: NEP 2020'S ROLE IN ADVANCING TRIBAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

This review paper critically examines the historical background, persistent challenges, and current policy provisions related to tribal education in India, with a special focus on the National Education Policy 2020. A total of 30 articles and 5 government report were systematically selected and reviewed. It discusses how scheduled tribes have been historically marginalised in the Education system, highlights the key issues and explores how NEP 2020 addresses these challenges through provisions.

Index terms: Tribal community, education, issues, challenges, NEP 2020, provisions.

1. Introduction

Education is crucial for the comprehensive development of individuals (Ottaplackal, J. J. & Anbu k.,2022). Education is a mechanism for regulating an individual's behaviour. It is one of the most crucial ways to enhance the personal endowments, develop skills, break limitations and so increase the accessible range of possibilities and options for a continuous improvement in well-being (Reddy,2021). The value of Education globally, the process of economic, political, and social transformation is well acknowledged and extensively documented (Prabhakar,2018).

India is a land of diverse ethnicities, cultures, religions, and indigenous peoples. The most backward and marginalized section is referred to as the tribal community (Daripa, S.K.,2017). The term "Scheduled Tribe" is defined under article 366(25) of the Indian Constitution, and Indigenous peoples are recognized as listed tribes under article 342 (Prabhakar,2018).

According to the Imperial Gazetteer of India, "a tribe is a collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous, though originally it might have been so" (Reddy,2021). India is home to over 550 different tribes (Reddy,2021). According to the 2011 census, India has 10,42,81,034 scheduled tribes. It accounts for 8.6% of the total population of India (Census of India,2011). These communities experience considerable challenges in accessing quality education, resulting in persistent discrepancies in literacy rates and educational achievement relative to the overall population (Tayyab,2023). The lack of an educational environment and infrastructure at home, as well as dependability on a subsistence economy, forces their children out of school in the early primary and early secondary stages, working mother (Sengupta & Ghosh,2012). There are several schemes and policies developed for tribal to raises educational level of tribal around the country (Shinde, 2023). Educational schemes are playing a key role in development and involvement level of tribes from primary to higher education (Shinde,2023). The present education policy of India the National Education Policy 2020 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education at all stages of school education and higher education including access to education (Draft of NEP 2020). It attempts to ensure that no child lacks the opportunity to study and excel despite their birth circumstances or background (Pib,2021).

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of educational background of tribal community in India, examining both the challenges faced by tribal community and how the current education policy of India, National Education Policy 2020 aimed to addressing these issues.

2. Objectives

1. To trace the historical background of tribal education in India.
2. To identify and analyse the major issues and challenges faced by tribal communities in accessing and continuing education.
3. To examine the provisions related to tribal education in the National Education Policy 2020.

3. Methodology

This review draws on a wide range of data sources, including government documents, peer-reviewed journal papers, government reports. Key sources include official National Education Policy 2020 materials, Ministry of Education reports, and data from empirical studies analyzing educational outcomes before and after NEP 2020 implementation. A systematic literature review was conducted, combining information from many sources to identify educational status, issues of tribal community. Researcher used the key words 'tribal community', 'tribal education of India', 'NEP 2020 and tribal education' etc. to find the relevant sources in Google scholars and also used some Open access journal.

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed for the selection of the examined research papers and reports in order to preserve academic rigor and relevance. The following were the criteria for inclusion: 1) Relevance to tribal community and National Education Policy 2020, 2) Publication date: priority was given to publications between 2017 to 2025. 3) Credible sources. The articles didn't meet these criteria are excluded.

4. Review of Related Literature

Education in India's tribal communities has historically encountered obstacles such as restricted access, socioeconomic impediments, linguistic difficulties, and cultural marginalization. With the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), there is renewed hope for improving the educational landscape for underprivileged groups, particularly tribal populations. This literature study analyses existing studies on the state of education in tribal communities, assesses their challenges and how NEP 2020 addresses their specific requirements, their needs and challenges. The review is structured thematically covering the historical background, their challenges for education, key provisions for tribal communities and how they align with unique needs of tribal learners.

Several studies have highlighted the background of tribal's education and persistent educational challenges faced by tribal communities in India and the potential of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 to bridge these longstanding gaps through inclusive and culturally responsive reforms. (Reddy,2021) conducted a study on tribal education in India, the study show the urgent need for government intervention to improve access and opportunities for tribal children. It emphasizes that while development efforts are underway, the pace remains slow, and tribal communities continue to struggle with low participation levels in education. (Prabhakar S.C, 2018) conducted a study on Tribal education in India: Challenges issues to conquest, the study finds that the quality of life for tribal communities has suffered due to their social exclusion from development, and children are not an exception. Develop appropriate awareness campaigns to educate tribal children. Enhancing parents' attitudes on their kids' education is one of the key components.

Research conducted by (Daripa,2017) find that the literacy rate among Schedule Tribes has remained low despite numerous government measures to improve educational status since independence. (Ottapackal and Anbu,2022) examined the issues and challenges of school education faced by tribal education, the study show that Tribals' language, identity, and culture cannot be disregarded in the process of obtaining education for their holistic development, but acknowledging and preserving their individuality could improve the educational outcome. (Gangle and Gour, 2019) analysed the tribals' educational challenge and issues, their study find that to improve the educational and financial conditions of indigenous communities, the government should provide necessary grants for basic and adult education, including training for better employment possibilities. Governments, planners, and non-governmental groups must address tribal education issues and increase funding in the national and state budgets. (Mahata,2024) on his study A Study on the Educational Challenges of the Tribal Community and NEP 2020, highlights the NEP 2020 provisions to tribal education. The study found that NEP 2020 aims to reduce educational inequality among SCs and STs. To promote school participation, SEDG students will receive special assistance, including hostels, bridge courses, tax exemptions, and scholarships, especially at the secondary level. Education, to facilitate them admission to higher education. (Shivam,2024) conducted a study on transforming Education for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Connection to NEP-2020, the study found that India's inclusive education system has improved, and the New Education Policy 2020 has the potential to transform it with proper implementation. This perspective shift will enhance and equalize education for impaired children, bridging the gap between expectations and realities. NEP aspires to ensure that no kid gets excluded from learning opportunities due to their birth circumstances or background. The proposal aims to prioritize socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). The NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of bridging social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes in school and higher education (Pib,2021).

5. Significance of the study

The present study adds important value to comprehending the educational environment of India's tribal community by conducting a critical review of their historical background, prevailing challenges, and the recent policy interventions proposed in the National Education Policy 2020. It sheds light on the Scheduled tribes' long-standing marginalisation in education, emphasizing the critical need for inclusive and equitable educational reforms.

6. Results

Background of tribal Education

6.1 Educational status of Tribal population

Literacy rates are key indicators of people's growth (Prabhakar,2018). In 1961, only 8.54 percent of tribes were literate, by 2011, that number had risen to 58.96 percent. However, the female literacy rate is only 49.35 percent, whereas male literacy is 68.53 percent. The Indian Government enacted legislation and dedicated resources to enhance access to elementary education enrolment in India. Therefore, throughout the past 50 years, there has been a significant growth in both literacy rates and the gross enrolment ratios of boys and girls in the general population (Reddy,2021).

Table no 1 Comparative literacy rate among total population and scheduled caste of India

Year	All social group			Scheduled Tribe		
	male	female	total	male	female	total
1961	40.4	15.35	28.3	13.83	3.16	8.53
1971	45.96	21.97	34.45	17.63	4.85	11.30
1981	56.38	29.76	43.57	24.52	8.04	16.35
1991	64.13	39.29	52.21	40.65	18.19	29.60
2001	75.26	53.67	64.84	59.17	34.76	47.10
2011	80.89	64.64	72.99	68.53	49.35	58.96

Source: Census of India, 2011, Office of the Registrar General

Table 1 displays the literacy difference between whole population and STs. The literacy rate among tribes increased from 8.53 percent in 1961 to 58.96 percent in 2011, whereas the overall population climbed from 28.30% in 1961 to 72.99% in 2011. Between 2001 and 2011, literacy rates increased by 11.86% for ST and 8.15% for the whole population.

Table 2 Gross enrolment Ratio

Class	ST	All categories
Class - I-V	137	116
Class- VI-VIII	88.9	85.5
Class-I-VIII	119.7	104.3
Class -IX-X	53.3	65
Class -XI-XII	28.8	39.3

Source Statistic of school education – 2010-2011

Table 2 displays the data we get from Statistic of School Education 2010-2011, if we analyse the data, it clearly visible that at the elementary level (class I–VIII), the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for ST children is 119.7, which is in good standing with the all India level (104.30). However, it drops sharply to 53.3 at the secondary level, which is nearly 12 points lower than the all India level, and drops even further to 28.8, which is 10.5 points lower than the all India level. In order for ST children to benefit from the general expansion of the economy, it is evident that the factors contributing to their high dropout rates after class VIII and again after class X must be improved.

Table 3 Drop out ratio

Class	ST (boys)	ST (girls)	All boys	All girls
I - V	37.2	33.9	28.7	25.1
I-VIII	54.7	55.4	40.3	41.0
I-IX	70.6	71.3	50.4	47.9

Source Statistic of school education – 2010-2011

One crucial metric for calculating the number of students continuing their education at various stages is dropout rates. Table 3 shows that the dropout rate for tribal boys and girls is about the same across all three stages; however, when comparing the disparity between tribal and all social groups. As we can see, it is quite low at the primary level (8.6) but extremely high at the secondary level (21.6). Table 3 shows that the primary dropout rate is 35.6, meaning that 74 out of 100 ST students are pursuing the next level of education. However, the number of ST students drops sharply to nearly 29 at the secondary level (I-X), which is extremely low when compared to the national dropout rate of students.

6.2 Issues and challenges of tribal education

There are numerous problems and difficulties affecting tribal education in India. The current reviews of related literature to identify the most urgent issues facing the field of education. One major issue that still exists is school dropout. Students leave school for a variety of reasons. Numerous researchers have found that accessing education can be hampered by geographic constraints, as many tribal members live in isolated areas, it can be challenging to go to local schools. They struggle with a lack of infrastructure at home or in the places they go with (Reddy,2021; Ottapackal & Anbu,2022; Tayyab,2023; Ahmed et al. 2022; and many others). Language and cultural barriers hampered in education of tribal people. Researchers discovered that the official language of the state is used in government schools, which makes learning difficult for kids from tribal hamlets because they are not accustomed to it (Daripa,2017; Reddy,2021; Ottapackal & Anbu, 2022; Jabbar et al. At,2024 and others). The absence of culturally appropriate curriculum that integrate tribal knowledge systems and customs may cause students to become disenchanted with their education (Bara, 2015). It was stated that more local information should be included in the curriculum because it is irrelevant to tribal people's ways of existence (Ottapackal & Anbu,2022).

The tribe long-standing disinterest in education is a result of socio-economic instability and financial difficulties (Chattopadhyay et. al,2009). People are forced to continue living in poverty because it is a vicious cycle. The chance to receive a better education is denied.

The lack of resources severely restricts indigenous girls' access to education, which results in illiteracy, a low gross enrolment ratio, and a high dropout rate. Studies shows that due to lack of funding and oversight, inadequate policies were unable to be implemented (Jabbar et. al,2024). Lack of teachers can have disastrous effects on the quality of schooling. The lack of knowledge of local languages, culture, community behaviour, social etiquette, etc., would raise concerns even if teachers were available. Tribal kids who never grasp the local language and culture are taught by a shortage of trained teachers, making the situation even more complicated and difficult and impeding their general growth and academic advancement (Jabbar et al,2024; Daripa,2017; Reddy,2021). The key to conquering ignorance is awareness. People who are educated will be better able to recognize their rights and take control of their lives.

6.3 Provisions of NEP 2020 towards Tribal community

The National Education Policy 2020 recognises that children from tribal communities often experience school education as irrelevant and disconnected from their lives.

1. Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Pedagogy

To address this, **Section 6.4.1** emphasizes the need to make education culturally relevant by integrating tribal knowledge systems and traditions into the curriculum. It proposes creating a contextual curriculum that includes local heritage, folklore, customs, and tribal wisdom, so students can relate better to what they learn. This will not only support learning but also help preserve tribal cultures and identities.

2. Local Language and Bilingual Education

A major challenge for tribal students is learning in unfamiliar languages. **Section 6.4.1** of the policy addresses this by proposing learning materials in tribal and local languages, especially at the foundational and primary levels. It also encourages bilingual education, allowing children to begin learning in their mother tongue and gradually transition to regional or national languages. This measure aims to enhance comprehension, confidence, and learning outcomes in early education.

3. Teacher Recruitment from Tribal Communities

The policy outlines steps to strengthen the presence of tribal role models in schools. **Section 6.4.1** recommends offering special scholarships for students from tribal areas to pursue teacher education programmes, with a clear preference for their deployment back into their home communities after qualification. This will not only ease the language and cultural barriers but also encourage more tribal children to view education as a viable path.

4. Community Participation and Monitoring

In tribal areas, trust between the community and formal institutions is vital. **Section 6.4.1** also proposes the appointment of community coordinators from Scheduled Tribe (ST) backgrounds to assist and monitor the educational development of tribal students. These coordinators will act as a bridge between the school and the local community, ensuring that education policies are implemented in culturally appropriate ways.

5. Reducing Dropout Rates and Improving Retention

Acknowledging that tribal students often drop out due to social alienation and poor learning outcomes, the policy proposes targeted measures to improve retention and enrolment. **Section 6.4.1** recommends redesigning curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment methods to make them more engaging and relevant for tribal students. Bridge courses, remedial classes, and extra academic support will be provided to help students catch up and stay in school.

6. Establishment of Special Education Zones (SEZs)

A key structural intervention is the creation of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in regions with high tribal populations and low educational indicators. As stated in **Section 6.1.2**, SEZs will receive additional central support in a 2:1 investment ratio (central to state), focusing on enhancing school infrastructure, teacher capacity, learning materials, and community engagement. These zones aim to address regional disparities and bring tribal areas on par with national education standards.

7. Gender and Intersectional Focus

Though not limited to tribal groups, the policy recognises the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity. Tribal girls face additional challenges such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and cultural restrictions. The policy, across Chapter 6, stresses that gender-sensitive infrastructure, menstrual hygiene support, and sensitised teachers are crucial to keep tribal girls in school.

These targeted provisions in the Draft NEP 2019 collectively aim to create an inclusive, equitable, and empowering education system that acknowledges and nurtures the unique identities, languages, and worldviews of India's tribal communities.

7. Discussion

The present systematic review aims to study the historical background of the tribal community, analyse their educational issues and challenges, NEP 2020 provisions related to tribal education and the potential of NEP 2020 in addressing the educational disparities and promoting equity and quality in tribal education. Historical data show that although literacy rates among Scheduled Tribes have improved from 8.53% in 1961 to 58.96% in 2011 the gap compared to the national average remains considerable (Census of India, 2011; Reddy, 2021). Furthermore, dropout rates among ST students remain alarmingly high, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels (Statistic of School Education, 2011-11)

Several studies reveal that access to education among tribal populations is hindered by a complex interplay of geographic isolation, poverty, linguistic differences, and cultural mismatch between tribal life and formal schooling (Ottapackal & Anbu, 2022; Daripa 2017; Tayyab, 2023). Language barriers are particularly significant, as many tribal children are first generation learners unfamiliar with the language of instruction in schools (Reddy, 2021; Jabbar et al., 2024). Additionally, the lack of culturally relevant curriculum leads to student disengagement and alienation, contributing to the cycle of dropout and educational underachievement (Bara, 2015; Ottapackal & Anbu, 2022).

While the National Education Policy 2020 offers progressive provisions for tribal education—such as culturally responsive curriculum, bilingual education, recruitment of tribal teachers, and creation of Special Education Zones (SEZs)—its success depends on effective implementation (NEP 2020, Sections 6.1.2 & 6.4.1). Scholars argue that without adequate funding, trained teachers, and community participation, these reforms may not reach the grassroots (Mahata, 2024; Jabbar et al., 2024). Proper monitoring, localized planning, and sensitivity to tribal languages and culture are essential to translate policy into impact (Ottapackal & Anbu, 2022).

Thus, implementation remains the most crucial challenge for NEP 2020's transformative potential. NEP 2020 aims to create an inclusive, equitable educational environment by aligning policy with the socio-cultural context of tribal learners, thereby working toward bridging the educational divide (Pib, 2021; Jabbar et al., 2024; Mahata, 2024).

8. Limitations

The main limit of the study is entirely dependent on secondary data and a literature review, which limits its scope in capturing the current ground level realities of tribal education following the implementation of NEP 2020.

Second limitations is the review excludes field-based empirical research, such as surveys, interviews, or case studies, which could have provided more detailed insights into the effectiveness of NEP provisions into various tribal region.

Thirdly, the regional diversity among tribal communities across India presents varying challenges, but this study analyses the tribal community as a largely homogeneous group. Lastly as the NEP 2020 is still in its early years of implementation, long term effects cannot be estimated.

9. Conclusion

This review has explored the historical context, key challenges, and policy responses concerning tribal education in India, with a particular focus on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Despite notable improvements in literacy and enrolment over the decades, tribal communities continue to face systemic barriers to quality education due to poverty, geographical isolation, language differences, and cultural disconnection from formal schooling. The NEP 2020 marks a progressive shift in policy, aiming to address these gaps through inclusive and culturally responsive measures. Provisions such as bilingual education, tribal teacher recruitment, community-based monitoring, and the establishment of Special Education Zones are significant steps toward bridging the educational divide. Furthermore, its intersectional approach recognises the unique challenges faced by tribal girls and other disadvantaged subgroups. However, the success of these reforms will depend on their implementation at the grassroots level, with active participation from tribal communities, adequate funding, trained personnel, and strong monitoring systems. If executed effectively, NEP 2020 has the potential to not only improve educational outcomes for tribal populations but also to promote social justice, cultural preservation, and national integration through equitable education.

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