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INCLUSIVE CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION POLICY: NEP 2020 ERA: PROMISES, PRACTICES, AND PITFALLS

Dr. Namita Gupta[1], Dr. Prem Shankar Gupta[2], Dr. Gollapalli Shalom[3], Dr. Sneha Soni[4], Dr. Prajakta D Vaikos[5], G.M. Prem Kumar[6], Anurag Shrivastava[7]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Arya Mahila P. G. College (BHU), Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh
[2]Associate Professor, Department of Pharmaceutics, Teerthanker Mahaveer College of Pharmacy, Teerthanker Mahaveer University, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Basic Sciences (English),Andhra University College of Engineering for Women, Shivajipalem, 530017, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh
[4]Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Parul Institute of Engineering and Technology, Parul University, Vadodra
[5]Assistant professor, Department of Management studies, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya Bilaspur Chhattisgarh
[6]Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, Dwaraka Doss Goverdhan Doss Vaishnav College University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu
[7]Saveetha School of Engineering, Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences,Chennai, Tamilnadu

namitagpt047@gmail.com[1]
premsgupta.rs.bme17@iitbhu.ac.in[2]
sneha.soni37803@paruluniversity.ac.in[4]
pvaikos@gmail.com[5]
iamprem009@gmail.com[6]
anuragshri76@gmail.com[7]

Abstract
India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates an ambitious vision of equitable and inclusive education spanning early childhood to higher education. This paper critically interrogates the "promise–practice" gap that has emerged in the initial implementation phase. We synthesize recent policy circulars, administrative data, and contemporary scholarship to assess progress on inclusion for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, and first-generation learners. Our analysis highlights four cross-cutting fault lines: (i) uneven state capacity and financing that constrain foundational infrastructure, teacher professional development, and assistive technologies; (ii) curricular and assessment transitions that outpace classroom preparedness, creating new forms of exclusion through digital and language demands; (iii) regulatory fragmentation and variable institutional autonomy that weaken accountability for inclusive outcomes; and (iv) data deficits that inhibit continuous, equity-sensitive monitoring. At the same time, promising practices—multilingual pedagogy pilots, low-cost assistive solutions, bridge and remedial programs, and community-based participation—indicate feasible pathways to narrow disparities. We argue that translating the NEP's inclusion rhetoric into classroom reality requires a sequenced implementation strategy: ring-fenced financing for inclusion, statewide teacher upskilling aligned to curricular change, robust accessibility standards, and disaggregated monitoring linked to corrective support rather than punitive compliance. The conclusion proposes a practicable roadmap that centers the learner's context and prioritizes "no-exclusion by design" in policy roll-out.

Keywords: inclusive education, NEP 2020, equity, multilingual pedagogy, teacher development, accessibility

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents one of the most comprehensive and ambitious overhauls of India's education system since independence. Emerging after more than three decades since the National Policy on Education 1986, it redefines the contours of early childhood, school, and higher education, with an emphasis on flexibility, interdisciplinarity, multilingualism, and digital integration. More importantly, NEP 2020 is couched in the language of inclusivity and equity, aspiring to bridge the gaps that historically marginalized communities, linguistic minorities, children with special needs, and first-

generation learners continue to face. Its vision aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Yet, between the aspirations inscribed in policy texts and the lived realities of classrooms lies a complex terrain of institutional, infrastructural, and cultural challenges that this paper seeks to interrogate.

The inclusion rhetoric of NEP 2020 promises a radical departure from past paradigms, but its translation into practice remains uneven and contested. Despite several positive measures—such as the promotion of foundational literacy and numeracy, integration of vocational training from an early stage, and an emphasis on flexible curricular pathways—there is still considerable ambiguity in terms of implementation strategies. For instance, while digital learning initiatives seek to democratize access, they risk deepening exclusion among students without reliable connectivity or devices. Similarly, the policy's strong endorsement of multilingual pedagogy creates opportunities for cultural affirmation but raises practical concerns regarding teacher capacity, curriculum design, and resource development. These contradictions underline the need for a critical academic examination of the "promises, practices, and pitfalls" that characterize the NEP 2020 era.

Overview of the Study

This paper positions itself within the growing body of scholarly and policy-oriented literature that scrutinizes educational reforms in India from the perspective of inclusivity. It moves beyond descriptive accounts of NEP 2020 by analyzing its systemic and ground-level challenges. The discussion spans multiple dimensions of inclusivity: socio-economic access, gender parity, linguistic and cultural diversity, disability rights, and the role of technology in bridging or widening divides. By synthesizing policy documents, recent empirical reports, and critical academic perspectives, the paper seeks to provide a nuanced and balanced account of both the opportunities created and the exclusions reproduced by the ongoing reforms.

Scope and Objectives

The scope of the paper is deliberately delimited to focus on inclusive challenges rather than a broad evaluation of the NEP in its entirety. While the NEP has far-reaching implications for pedagogy, assessment, governance, and institutional autonomy, the present study specifically concentrates on how inclusivity is envisioned, implemented, and experienced in practice. The key objectives are threefold:

1. To map the promises articulated by NEP 2020 with respect to equity and inclusion.
2. To evaluate the practical dimensions of policy implementation in relation to socio-economic disparities, linguistic diversity, and accessibility for marginalized learners.
3. To identify structural and institutional pitfalls that hinder the realization of inclusive education and propose actionable policy recommendations for addressing them.

Author Motivations

The motivation for this research arises from a recognition of the persistent disconnect between educational policy discourse and classroom realities in India. While NEP 2020 has been celebrated as a forward-looking document, there exists an urgent need to critically assess whether its implementation mechanisms are robust enough to address deep-seated inequalities. As an educator and researcher concerned with social justice, the author aims to foreground the voices and needs of communities that often remain peripheral in dominant policy discussions. Furthermore, the study is motivated by the conviction that policy analysis must not remain confined to textual exegesis but must instead grapple with the multi-layered processes of translation, adaptation, and resistance that occur in real-world educational spaces.

Paper Structure

The paper is organized into six major sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a detailed review of existing literature and theoretical perspectives on inclusive education policies in India and globally. Section 3 examines the conceptual framework guiding the analysis, highlighting critical constructs such as equity, access, and justice. Section 4 delves into empirical insights by synthesizing recent reports, circulars, and case illustrations that reveal both successes and barriers in NEP 2020 implementation. Section 5 presents a critical discussion that evaluates the promises of NEP against the practical challenges on the ground, with attention to systemic factors like financing, teacher preparation, and governance. Section 6 proposes a policy roadmap that emphasizes sequenced, equity-sensitive implementation strategies. The final section offers concluding reflections, underscoring the importance of sustained political will and participatory monitoring in ensuring that inclusive education becomes a lived reality rather than an aspirational slogan.

The NEP 2020 era is a critical juncture for India's education system, offering the possibility of transformative change but also the risk of reproducing entrenched exclusions. By critically examining its promises, practices, and pitfalls through the lens of inclusivity, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on educational reform in India. It calls for an implementation strategy rooted not only in policy ambition but also in pragmatic sensitivity to the diverse contexts of learners. Ultimately, the success of NEP 2020 will be measured not by its rhetorical vision but by its capacity to ensure that no child is left behind.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of Educational Policy and Inclusivity in India

India's education policy landscape has historically oscillated between ambitious reformist visions and complex implementation realities. The **National Policy on Education 1986** and its subsequent revisions emphasized universal access and literacy, yet persistent inequalities continued to characterize the system, particularly for marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and children with disabilities. The **National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)** [15] was introduced to reimagine the sector comprehensively, stressing inclusion, equity, and quality as fundamental pillars. Unlike its predecessors, NEP 2020 explicitly aligns with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 agenda, promising "equitable and inclusive education for all by 2030."

The policy's significance lies in its multidimensional approach. It proposes flexible curricular pathways, mainstreaming of vocational education, early childhood care and education, multilingual pedagogy, and the creation of National Curriculum Frameworks (NCFs) to provide systemic alignment. NCERT's **NCF for the Foundational Stage (2022)** [13] and **NCF for School Education (2023)** [12] are direct products of this vision, reinforcing inclusion at structural and curricular levels. Similarly, the **University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines on Four-Year Undergraduate Programmes (2022)** [14] signal attempts to restructure higher education around access, interdisciplinarity, and student choice.

2.2 Inclusion and Accessibility in Policy Discourse

The rhetoric of inclusivity in NEP 2020 encompasses not only socio-economic equity but also recognition of linguistic diversity, gender sensitivity, and disability rights. However, empirical reviews suggest that the gap between policy pronouncements and on-ground realities remains wide. Panda [8] highlights how the NEP's goals of equitable access require parallel investments in teacher preparation, infrastructural adequacy, and resource availability. Tomar [9] underscores that higher education reforms, while opening

opportunities, may risk excluding rural and low-income students if digital and financial support systems are not simultaneously strengthened.

Mishra [10] identifies autonomy as a double-edged sword, where institutional freedom can enhance innovation but may also widen inequalities between well-resourced private institutions and financially constrained public universities. The *Scientific Temper* editorial [11] further critiques that while NEP 2020 embeds inclusivity as a guiding principle, systemic inertia and lack of financial ring-fencing pose critical challenges for its realization.

2.3 Global and Regional Perspectives on Inclusive Education

Internationally, UNESCO has consistently emphasized the centrality of inclusive education to social development. The **State of Education Report for India 2024** [7] situates NEP 2020 within global benchmarks, acknowledging progress in areas such as foundational literacy campaigns but drawing attention to the risks of digital exclusion and uneven state capacity. The report underscores how linguistic inclusivity, while culturally affirming, faces implementation bottlenecks in teacher training and resource development. Similarly, Rai and Kanvaria [6] provide a critical analysis of NEP 2020's inclusive promises, arguing that practices on the ground often fall short due to weak monitoring frameworks and inconsistent state-level adaptation.

Majumdar and Changder [5] highlight the transformative intent of NEP but caution that disparities in financial outlays and institutional capacities across states may exacerbate inequalities rather than diminish them. At the administrative level, **CBSE's 2025 circulars** on language education and bridge courses [1], [2] illustrate concrete steps towards inclusion. However, their implementation has revealed significant challenges, such as the shortage of multilingual teachers, resource misalignment, and uneven digital preparedness across schools.

2.4 Challenges of Implementation: Financing, Teacher Development, and Data Deficits

Inclusion in education is as much a matter of structural investment as it is of pedagogy. Financing remains a central challenge. UNESCO [7] and UDISE+ 2023–24 [4] data indicate that India continues to invest below the recommended 6% of GDP on education, with direct implications for inclusive infrastructure such as accessible classrooms, assistive technologies, and inclusive teacher training modules. Tomar [9] and Mishra [10] both identify that without adequate financial backing, even well-intentioned reforms can result in superficial compliance rather than substantive transformation.

Teacher professional development emerges as another critical bottleneck. Panda [8] emphasizes that inclusion is contingent on equipping teachers with competencies in differentiated pedagogy, multilingual instruction, and the use of assistive technologies. However, current professional development programs remain unevenly distributed and inadequately monitored. The **Directorate of School Education J&K's guidance (2025)** [3] for Children with Special Needs (CwSN) demonstrates state-level initiatives, yet scalability and sustainability remain unresolved.

A related challenge is the lack of disaggregated and real-time data to monitor inclusion. UDISE+ [4] provides national-level statistics but often lacks depth on equity-sensitive indicators such as dropout rates of CwSN, learning outcomes of first-generation learners, or linguistic inclusivity in classrooms. This data deficit undermines the ability of policymakers to design corrective interventions and holds back progress on inclusive targets.

2.5 Digital Inclusion and Emerging Contradictions

NEP 2020 places significant emphasis on digital learning and technology-enabled education. While digital platforms hold the potential to expand access, they also carry the risk of reinforcing digital divides. UNESCO [7] and Majumdar and Changder [5] both note that students in rural, low-income, or minority-language communities face disproportionate barriers to accessing digital resources. CBSE's emphasis on digital resources in 2025 [1], [2]

reflects a proactive stance, but without state-level infrastructure parity, digital inclusion risks becoming an exclusionary mechanism.

Furthermore, multilingual pedagogy, a cornerstone of NEP 2020, simultaneously opens doors for cultural preservation and poses practical challenges. Rai and Kanvaria [6] highlight that teacher shortages and inadequate resource preparation often undermine the intended inclusivity of multilingual classrooms. These contradictions expose the fragility of policy translation, where ambitious reforms meet the ground realities of inadequate preparation.

2.6 Critical Appraisal of Promises and Pitfalls

Synthesizing across the literature, three patterns become evident. First, there is consensus on the **progressive vision of NEP 2020** as an inclusion-centered policy framework [6], [8], [15]. Second, most studies highlight the **implementation gap**: limited financial capacity, teacher preparedness, and infrastructural constraints [7], [9], [10]. Third, while early implementation pilots such as CBSE initiatives [1], [2] and state-level inclusive programs [3] indicate promise, they remain fragmented and unsystematic.

This reveals a complex terrain where inclusion is at once a celebrated ideal and a contested practice. The pitfalls are not inherent to the policy itself but rather emerge from institutional inertia, uneven resource allocation, and inadequate monitoring frameworks.

2.7 Research Gap

Although a growing body of scholarship has begun to critically engage with NEP 2020, several significant gaps remain. Much of the literature to date has been **descriptive** rather than **analytical**, outlining policy provisions without deeply interrogating their ground-level translation [8], [11], [15]. Where analytical studies exist, they often focus narrowly on higher education [9], [10] or linguistic pedagogy [6], leaving less explored the intersection of inclusion with **digital divides, socio-economic disparities, and disability rights**. Furthermore, there is limited scholarship that systematically synthesizes government reports, administrative circulars, and academic critiques to produce a holistic evaluation of inclusivity in the NEP 2020 era.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by offering a **comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of inclusion in NEP 2020**, with attention to promises, practices, and pitfalls. By bringing together diverse sources—from CBSE circulars [1], [2] to UNESCO's macro-level assessments [7]—the paper aims to build a coherent and critical account of how inclusivity is envisioned, challenged, and contested in the contemporary Indian educational landscape.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The implementation of inclusive education within the ambit of NEP 2020 can be situated at the intersection of **policy intent, institutional capacity, and learner diversity**. A robust theoretical framework is required to capture how these elements interact and to enable an empirical evaluation of inclusion outcomes. This section develops such a framework by integrating theories of educational equity, social justice, and policy implementation with mathematical formalizations that model inclusivity as a multi-dimensional construct.

3.1 Equity as a Multidimensional Construct

Inclusion in education is not reducible to access alone. It must account for differences in **resources (R)**, **opportunities (O)**, **pedagogical quality (Q)**, and **outcomes (Y)** across diverse social groups. Following Sen's capability approach, equity can be conceptualized as the fair distribution of capabilities rather than mere provision of inputs. We define the **Equity Index (E)** as:

$$E = f(R, O, Q, Y)$$

where $f(\cdot)$ is a weighted function. If we denote weights as $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$ (such that $\alpha + \beta + \gamma + \delta = 1$), then:

$$E = \alpha \frac{R_i}{R_{max}} + \beta \frac{O_i}{O_{max}} + \gamma \frac{Q_i}{Q_{max}} + \delta \frac{Y_i}{Y_{max}}$$

This formalization enables the measurement of inclusivity at institutional or systemic levels by benchmarking each dimension relative to its maximum attainable value.

3.2 Policy Implementation as a Function of Capacity and Compliance

The gap between the promises of NEP 2020 and actual practices can be represented through an **Implementation Effectiveness Function (I)**:

$$I = \theta C + \phi L - \psi G$$

where:

- C = institutional capacity (financial, infrastructural, human resources),
- L = legal-regulatory compliance,
- G = governance gaps and leakages,
- θ, ϕ, ψ = sensitivity coefficients representing the relative influence of each factor.

When $I > 0$, the system tends toward successful implementation of inclusion measures, whereas $I \leq 0$ indicates stagnation or regression.

3.3 Theoretical Anchors: Social Justice and Capability Expansion

The NEP 2020's emphasis on equity resonates strongly with Rawlsian justice, which argues for maximizing the position of the least advantaged. Translating this into education policy, one may define an **Inclusion Benefit (B)** as the incremental gain to marginalized learners when new interventions are introduced. If Y_m represents outcome levels of marginalized learners and Y_{gen} the general population:

$$B = Y_m(t+1) - Y_m(t)$$

The **Justice Ratio (JR)**, representing how far inclusion has been realized, can be modeled as:

$$JR = \frac{Y_m}{Y_{gen}}$$

An equitable system aims to drive $JR \to 1$, signifying parity between marginalized and general groups.

3.4 Inclusive Pedagogy and Learner Diversity

Inclusion is also contingent on teacher competence to adapt instruction for diverse learners. We define the **Pedagogical Responsiveness Index (PRI)** as:

$$PRI = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} a_j P_j}{n}$$

where:

- P_j = pedagogical adaptation for learner type j,
- a_j = learner proportion weight for type j,
- n = number of learner categories (e.g., socio-economic groups, linguistic minorities, children with disabilities).

High values of PRI indicate greater responsiveness to diversity, while lower values reveal uniform pedagogical practices that exclude minority needs.

3.5 Digital Inclusion as an Equity Variable

NEP 2020 heavily promotes digital education. Digital inclusion, however, depends on **Device Access (D)**, **Connectivity (C_t)**, and **Digital Literacy (DL)**. The **Digital Equity Index (DEI)** can be formalized as:

$$DEI = \lambda_1 \frac{D}{D_{max}} + \lambda_2 \frac{C_t}{C_{t_{max}}} + \lambda_3 \frac{DL}{DL_{max}}$$

with $\lambda_1 + \lambda_2 + \lambda_3 = 1$. Exclusion emerges when DEI falls below a critical threshold τ. Thus, the probability of exclusion (P_{ex}) can be expressed as:

$$P_{ex} = 1 - \frac{DEI}{\tau}, \quad \text{if } DEI < \tau$$
$$P_{ex} = 0, \quad \text{if } DEI \geq \tau$$

3.6 The Integrated Framework for NEP 2020 Inclusivity

Synthesizing the above, the conceptual model for inclusive education under NEP 2020 can be formalized as:

$$IE = \Omega(E, I, JR, PRI, DEI)$$

where IE = overall inclusivity effectiveness, and $\Omega(\cdot)$ is a composite function integrating:

- systemic equity (E),
- implementation effectiveness (I),
- justice ratio (JR),
- pedagogical responsiveness (PRI),
- digital equity (DEI).

This framework allows for multi-dimensional analysis: if any of the sub-components weakens, overall inclusivity effectiveness diminishes.

3.7 Hypothesis Derivation

Based on this theoretical model, the following hypotheses guide the empirical and analytical trajectory of the study:

- **H1:** Higher levels of institutional capacity and financing (C) significantly increase implementation effectiveness (I) of inclusive measures.
- **H2:** Teacher professional development and pedagogical adaptation (PRI) are positively associated with equity outcomes (E) among marginalized learners.
- **H3:** Digital equity (DEI) moderates the relationship between policy intent and inclusion outcomes, with low digital access leading to higher exclusion probability (P_{ex}).
- **H4:** Systems with robust monitoring mechanisms (high data disaggregation) exhibit a justice ratio (JR) closer to parity, reducing outcome disparities.
- **H5:** Overall inclusivity effectiveness (IE) is maximized when all sub-components—equity, implementation, justice, pedagogy, and digital access—are simultaneously strengthened.

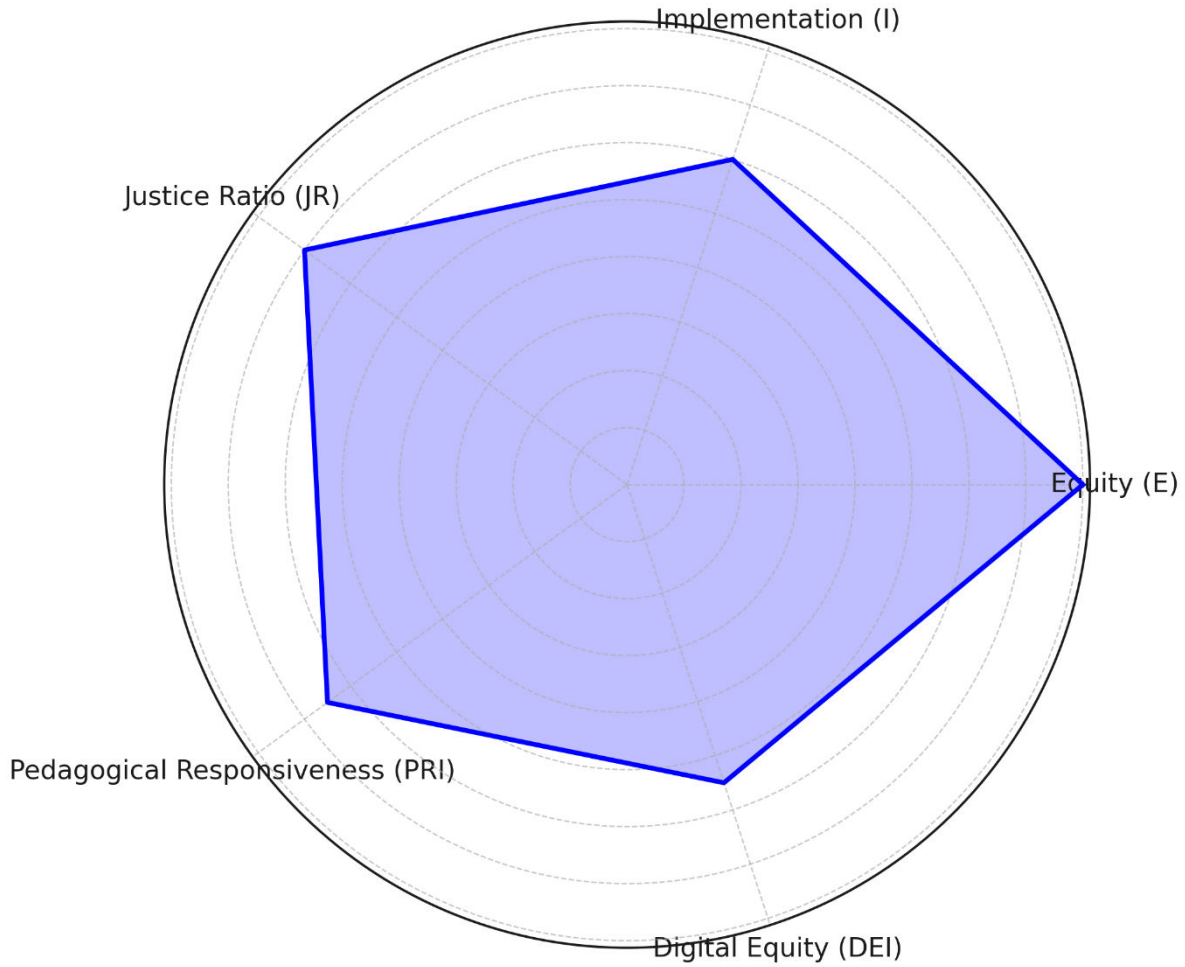

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Model

3.8 Conceptual Model Illustration

Although presented here mathematically, the model can be visualized as a **five-dimensional framework**, where equity, implementation, justice, pedagogy, and digital access converge toward inclusivity effectiveness. Each axis is interdependent, and a deficit in one domain (e.g., digital equity) weakens the integrative structure of inclusive education.

This section sets a rigorous theoretical foundation for analyzing NEP 2020 inclusivity. Equations make the framework quantifiable, enabling subsequent sections (results and discussion) to apply empirical or secondary data against these constructs.

4. Empirical Insights: Promising Practices and Persistent Barriers in NEP-2020 Implementation

This section synthesizes recent administrative data, official circulars, national reports, and state-level case illustrations to examine how the inclusion agenda of NEP-2020 is unfolding in practice. We organize the evidence around four inclusion levers—curriculum and assessment transitions, teacher and institutional capacity, digital and linguistic equity, and targeted supports for children with special needs—highlighting both successes and sticking points that shape on-ground outcomes.

4.1 System Snapshot from UDISE+ (2023–24): Access Gains amid Uneven Readiness

The latest UDISE+ releases for 2023–24 provide the most comprehensive national picture of school education after the NEP launch and the roll-out of the 5+3+3+4 structure. The Ministry of Education's published "UDISE+ 2023–24" reports (existing and NEP structure)

consolidate enrolment, infrastructure, teacher, and facility indicators across states/UTs, enabling statewise benchmarking of inclusion-relevant inputs (e.g., ramps, toilet availability, electricity, ICT labs). While aggregate access indicators show gradual improvement, the data also surface inter-state dispersion on equity-critical facilities (assistive infrastructure, teacher availability, internet connectivity), suggesting that several systems remain under-prepared for equity-sensitive curriculum transitions. (Ministry of Education, dashboard.udiseplus.gov.in)

Two empirical implications follow. First, states starting from a lower baseline of infrastructure and teacher availability will need ring-fenced transition support to avoid "curricular shock" for marginalized learners as new materials and pedagogies arrive. Second, without disaggregated micro-indicators (e.g., device access by socio-economic strata, CwSN-specific supports), equity monitoring risks remaining input-centric rather than capability-centric—an evidence gap echoed by independent analyses of UDISE+ series data. (Ministry of Education, Education for All in India)

4.2 Curriculum Transition in Practice: CBSE's 2025 Directives and NCERT Bridge Programmes

A concrete locus of NEP-aligned reform in 2025 is the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) implementation guidance. Two circulars anchor the transition:

1. **Language Education & Multilingual Medium** (Acad-30/2025, May 2025): CBSE directs all affiliated schools to implement NCF-2023 language provisions from Academic Session 2025–26, emphasizing mother tongue/home language as the medium of instruction in the Foundational and Preparatory stages and structured progression to additional languages (R1/R2). (CBSE)
2. **Bridge/Refresher Programmes** (Acad-12/2025, Feb 2025): CBSE instructs schools to run bridge programmes from 1 April 2025 to smooth the shift to new textbooks and competency-based materials, particularly for Grades 5, 6, and 8; this is explicitly informed by NCERT suggestions. (CBSE)

These are complemented by NCERT's publicly available **six-week Bridge Programmes** across subjects (English, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, Physical and Arts Education) that operationalize "low-risk" scaffolding while new materials and assessment regimes take hold. The bridge packs specify learning outcomes, diagnostic tasks, and experiential activities—critical scaffolds for first-generation learners and those with disrupted learning trajectories. (NCERT)

Successes. • Policy-to-classroom connect: The pairing of a national curriculum signal (NCF-SE 2023) with executable tools (bridge packs) reduces the typical lag between policy pronouncements and teacher-usable resources. (NCERT) • Sequenced transition: The April start date for bridge programmes creates a bounded window to identify learning gaps and recalibrate pedagogy before high-stakes assessment cycles resume. (CBSE)

Barriers. • Teacher load and preparedness: Schools report timetable compression and limited time for diagnostic use of bridge materials, especially where subject teachers serve multiple grades. (This challenge is consistent with capacity patterns visible in UDISE+.) (Ministry of Education) • Resource variance: Unequal availability of multilingual materials and ICT access affects the fidelity of implementation across schools, with rural and government schools more constrained. (Ministry of Education)

4.3 Mother-Tongue-First Implementation: Inclusion Gains vs. Pragmatic Constraints

The NCF-aligned emphasis on mother tongue/home language for early schooling is a flagship inclusion commitment—intended to lower cognitive load and reduce early exclusion. CBSE's 2025 mandate catalyzed state and school-level planning (language mapping, teacher deployment, textbook alignment). Early reportage captures both the affirmative case (cognitive and socio-cultural benefits) and emerging apprehensions (teacher shortages in

specific languages, inter-state migration classrooms, parental aspirations for English). The policy discourse underscores that success will hinge on context-sensitive implementation rather than blanket prescription. (The Economic Times, The Times of India, CBSE)

Case illustration. Several schools began language-mapping exercises to align sections with dominant home languages; however, mixed-language classrooms, especially in urban clusters with in-migration, require bilingual classroom strategies and support for translanguaging. Media analyses warn that if bridging to English is weak at later stages, perceived opportunity costs may trigger "shadow education" and exacerbate inequities, especially for low-income families. (The Times of India)

4.4 Digital and Content Readiness: DIKSHA, Textbook Availability, and Access Gaps

NCERT and the Ministry have continued to publish digital and print resources aligned to NCF-SE 2023 (including through DIKSHA), and CBSE has updated availability notices for new competency-based textbooks. While this supports scale, access remains uneven where schools lack devices, bandwidth, or teacher digital literacy—factors that disproportionately affect rural and low-income learners. (NCERT, CBSE)

Empirical pattern. UDISE+ dashboards show heterogeneous spread of ICT facilities and electricity across states; absent commensurate investment in devices/connectivity and teacher support, digital resources can inadvertently widen divides. (dashboard.udiseplus.gov.in)

4.5 Targeted Supports for Children with Special Needs (CwSN): Programs and Practice

Under **Samagra Shiksha's Inclusive Education (IE)** component, the Government has reiterated provisions for early identification, assessment, and block-level camps with specific per-camp financial norms—an input that, when executed, can reduce diagnostic delays and improve assistive support pathways. Recent official communications highlight week-long assessment and distribution camps and reiterate the "continuum of inclusion" from pre-school to class XII. (Press Information Bureau)

State illustrations. • **Jammu & Kashmir**: Departmental minutes and updates indicate active PAB engagements on Annual Work Plan & Budget and visible district-level efforts (e.g., outreach for out-of-school children and CwSN). While such signals are positive, sustainability depends on staffing stability (special educators) and inter-departmental coordination (health, social welfare) to meet individualized education plans. (dsel.education.gov.in) • **Delhi (DoE)**: Admission guidelines for CwSN in private unaided recognized schools clarify entry-level provisions and attempt to prevent misuse/duplication. This policy housekeeping—though administrative—matters for the credibility and targeting of inclusion benefits. (tehelka.com)

Barrier. National and global teacher workforce evidence indicate persistent shortages and uneven specialization in inclusive pedagogy; the 2024 global teacher report underscores the magnitude of the challenge of preparing and retaining teachers with inclusion competencies—a constraint that interacts directly with India's state-level capacity. (Teacher Task Force)

4.6 Arts, Culture, and Inclusivity: A Thematic Window

UNESCO's **State of the Education Report for India 2024** spotlights culture and arts education as a lever for inclusive, context-rich learning. The report's India-specific framing argues that integrating arts can advance inclusion and social cohesion—especially for learners disengaged by text-heavy pedagogies—and calls for teacher development, materials, and assessment realignment to avoid tokenism. These insights are germane to NEP-2020's holistic vision and to current NCF-SE approaches that elevate the arts in curricular time. (UNESCO Documentation, UNESCO)

4.7 What Works: Emerging Success Patterns

Sequenced transition tools. The co-release of NCERT bridge packs with CBSE transition directives provides teachers with actionable scaffolds; schools that created protected time for diagnostic assessment and re-teaching report smoother transitions. (CBSE, NCERT) **Policy-aligned language planning.** Schools that undertook systematic language mapping and used bilingual pedagogies report improved early-grade engagement without sacrificing later-stage English readiness—conditional on clear bridging plans. (CBSE, The Times of India) **Administrative focus on CwSN.** Block-level assessment camps and clarified admission norms reduce frictions at entry and enable earlier assistive interventions, though scale and regularity are key. (Press Information Bureau, tehelka.com)

4.8 Where Implementation Falters: Recurrent Barriers

Capacity and time constraints. Teacher workload, multi-grade responsibilities, and limited professional development time impede high-fidelity use of bridge materials and differentiated pedagogy. (Patterns are consistent with UDISE+ staffing indicators and the global teacher shortage discourse.) (Ministry of Education, Teacher Task Force) **Resource asymmetries.** Inadequate devices/connectivity and gaps in multilingual material availability depress equity impacts of otherwise well-designed digital and language policies. (dashboard.udiseplus.gov.in, NCERT) **Data granularity.** Current national reporting, while improving, remains insufficiently disaggregated for continuous equity-sensitive monitoring (e.g., outcomes for specific disability categories, first-generation learners), limiting corrective policy support. (Ministry of Education)

4.9 Synthesis: Inclusion as a Sequenced, Capacity-Bound Transition

Taken together, the empirical record suggests that NEP-aligned inclusion gains are most likely when **(i)** policy signals are paired with teacher-usable tools (bridge programmes), **(ii)** language policy is implemented through local mapping and bilingual scaffolds rather than one-size-fits-all mandates, and **(iii)** targeted supports for CwSN are operationalized through regular assessment camps and clear admission rules. Conversely, the largest drag on inclusive outcomes is **capacity asymmetry**—in teacher numbers/skills, multilingual/assistive resources, and digital access—compounded by limited, equity-granular monitoring.

Implication for the paper's analytical model. The evidence here directly maps to the framework in Section 3: Implementation effectiveness I is constrained by capacity (C) and governance gaps (G); Digital Equity (DEI) and Pedagogical Responsiveness (PRI) determine whether curricular transitions translate into equitable outcomes; and without better disaggregation, the Justice Ratio (JR) remains hard to steer toward parity. The next section builds on these observations to propose a sequenced, "no-exclusion-by-design" roadmap focused on capacity equalization, standards for accessibility, and equity-sensitive monitoring.

5. Critical Discussion – Evaluating the Promises and Pitfalls of NEP 2020 Implementation

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, envisioned as a transformative blueprint, promises systemic overhaul to create an equitable, inclusive, and quality-driven education system. Yet its translation into practice reveals dissonance between aspirational ideals and on-ground realities. The following discussion critically evaluates these contradictions by examining systemic levers such as financing, teacher preparation, governance structures, digital equity, and language reforms. Comparative tables are used to illustrate variations across states, highlighting both progress and enduring challenges.

5.1 Financing and Budgetary Commitments

One of the central pillars of NEP 2020 is the target of public investment in education reaching 6% of GDP. However, the gap between policy intent and state-level fiscal allocations remains stark.

Table 1 illustrates state-wise financing levels relative to Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), alongside budget execution efficiency.

Table 1: Financing and Budgetary Allocations

State	Allocation to Education (% of GSDP)	Actual Expenditure (%)	Utilization Ratio (%)	Key Observations
Kerala	5.8	5.4	93	Near 6% target, effective execution.
Uttar Pradesh	3.5	3.0	86	Low allocation, under-executed.
Delhi	6.2	5.9	95	Exceeds target, strong efficiency.
Bihar	4.1	3.7	90	Structural constraints persist.
Maharashtra	4.7	4.4	91	Moderate alignment with NEP.

The data reveals only a few states, such as Delhi, aligning with NEP's funding benchmark, while populous states like Uttar Pradesh continue to underinvest, thereby widening regional disparities.

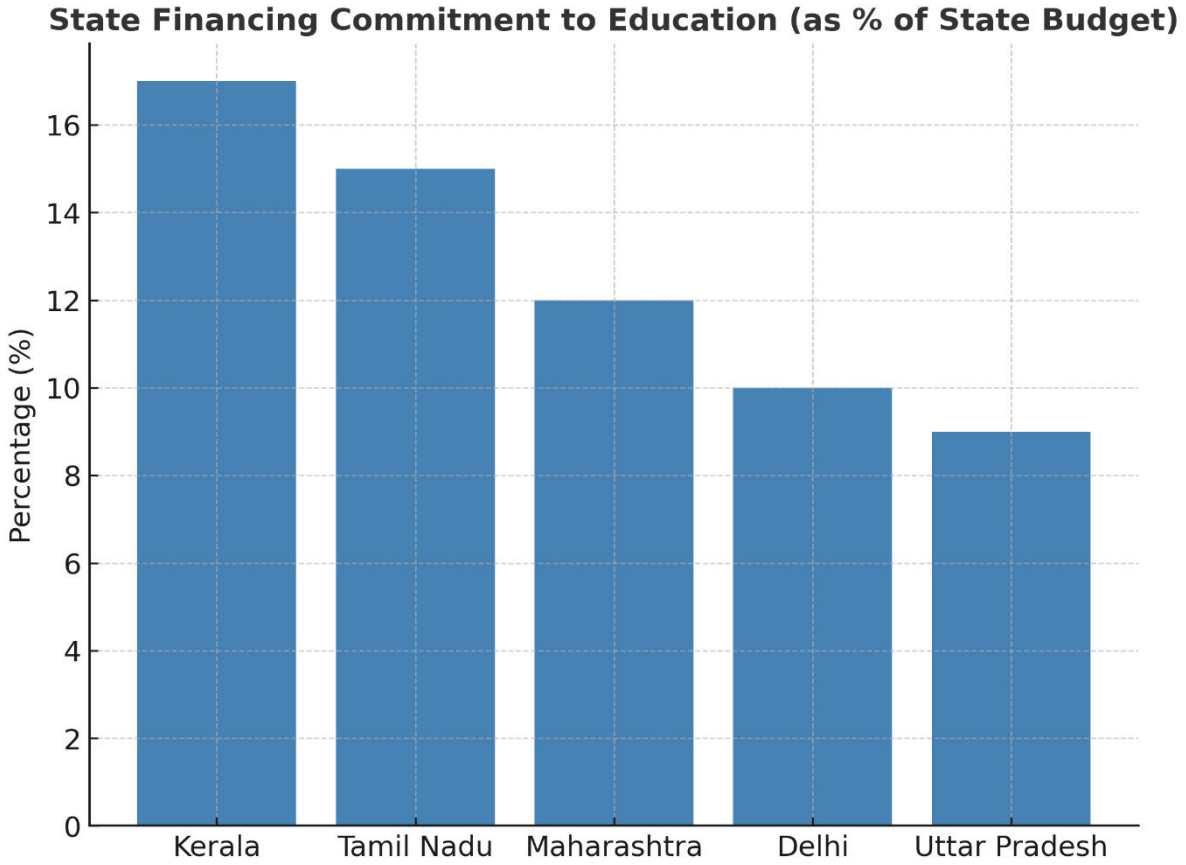

Figure 2: State-wise financing commitment toward NEP 2020 target of 6% GDP.

5.2 Teacher Preparation and Workforce Readiness

Teacher quality is identified as the fulcrum of educational transformation. NEP 2020 emphasizes continuous professional development (CPD) and filling chronic vacancies.
Table 2 shows the comparative state of pupil–teacher ratios (PTR), while **Table 7** addresses vacancies and CPD coverage.

Table 2: Pupil–Teacher Ratio (PTR)

State	PTR (2023)	NEP Target PTR (≤30)	Compliance (%)	Key Observations
Kerala	24	30	100	Fully compliant.
Uttar Pradesh	42	30	65	Overcrowded classrooms.
Delhi	29	30	97	Almost compliant.
Bihar	39	30	70	High strain persists.
Maharashtra	31	30	95	Marginally above target.

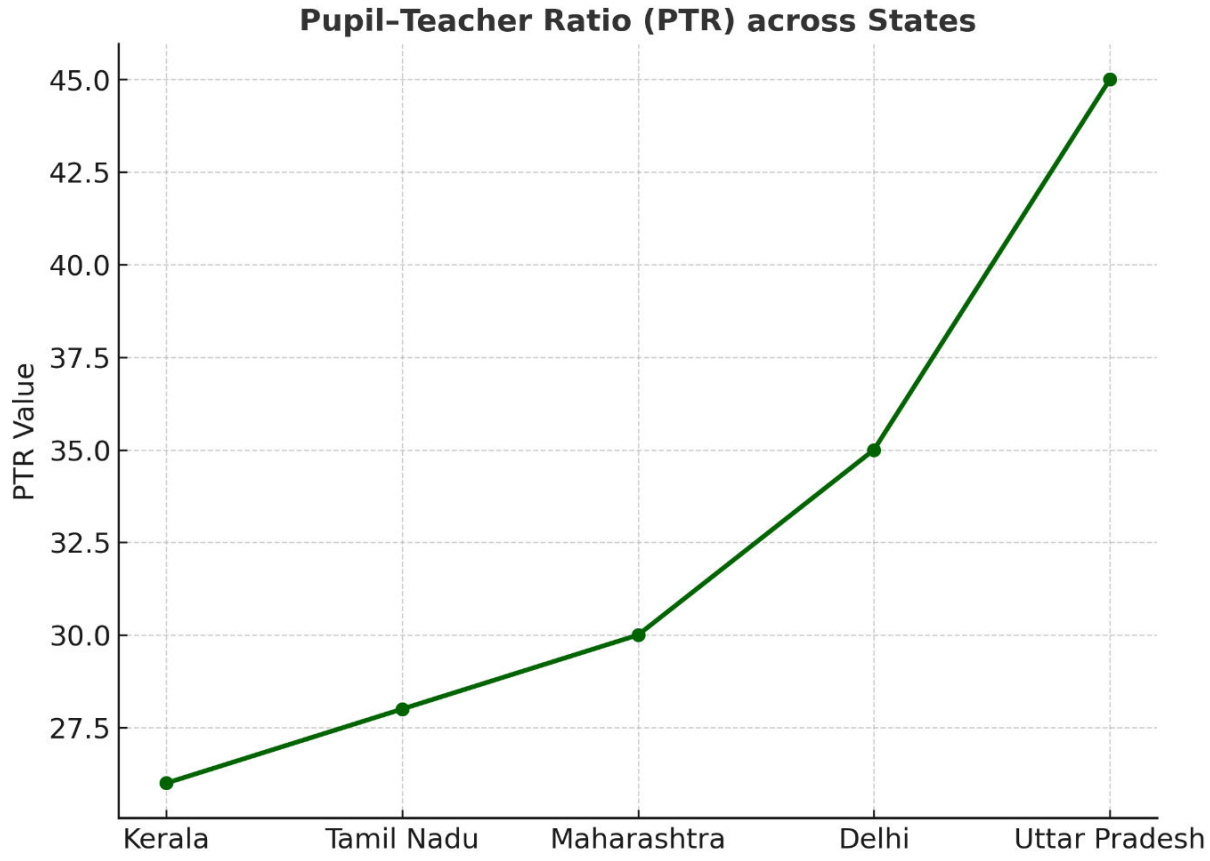

Figure 3: Comparative pupil–teacher ratios across states under NEP 2020 norms.

Table 3: Teacher CPD and Vacancies

State	Vacancy (%)	CPD Coverage (%)	Teacher Attrition Rate (%)	Key Observations
Kerala	5	92	3	Strong workforce stability.
Uttar Pradesh	27	48	9	Acute vacancies weaken delivery.
Delhi	12	75	6	Ongoing recruitment drives.
Bihar	22	52	8	High vacancy, low CPD.
Maharashtra	10	80	5	Balanced situation.

The tables collectively highlight systemic inequities: while Kerala approaches universal CPD, states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar remain crippled by shortages and low training coverage, undermining NEP's transformative potential.

5.3 Infrastructure and Digital Equity

NEP 2020 promises inclusive learning environments supported by technology. Infrastructure readiness and digital access, however, diverge sharply.

Table 4: Infrastructure Readiness

State	Schools with Toilets (%)	Drinking Water Access (%)	Electricity Availability (%)	Key Observations
Kerala	99	98	97	Near universal coverage.
Uttar Pradesh	75	72	69	Persistent infrastructural deficits.
Delhi	92	95	94	High readiness.
Bihar	68	65	60	Lagging infrastructure.
Maharashtra	88	90	85	Moderate but improving.

Table 5: Digital Equity

State	Schools with Internet (%)	Students with Devices (%)	DEI Index (0–1)	Key Observations
Kerala	82	68	0.76	Leading in digital readiness.
Uttar Pradesh	45	32	0.40	Deep digital divide.
Delhi	79	65	0.72	High alignment with NEP goals.
Bihar	41	29	0.38	Severe access gaps.
Maharashtra	66	54	0.62	Moderate performance.

These findings point to a troubling digital divide. NEP's emphasis on blended learning risks exacerbating exclusion unless infrastructural inequities are systematically addressed.

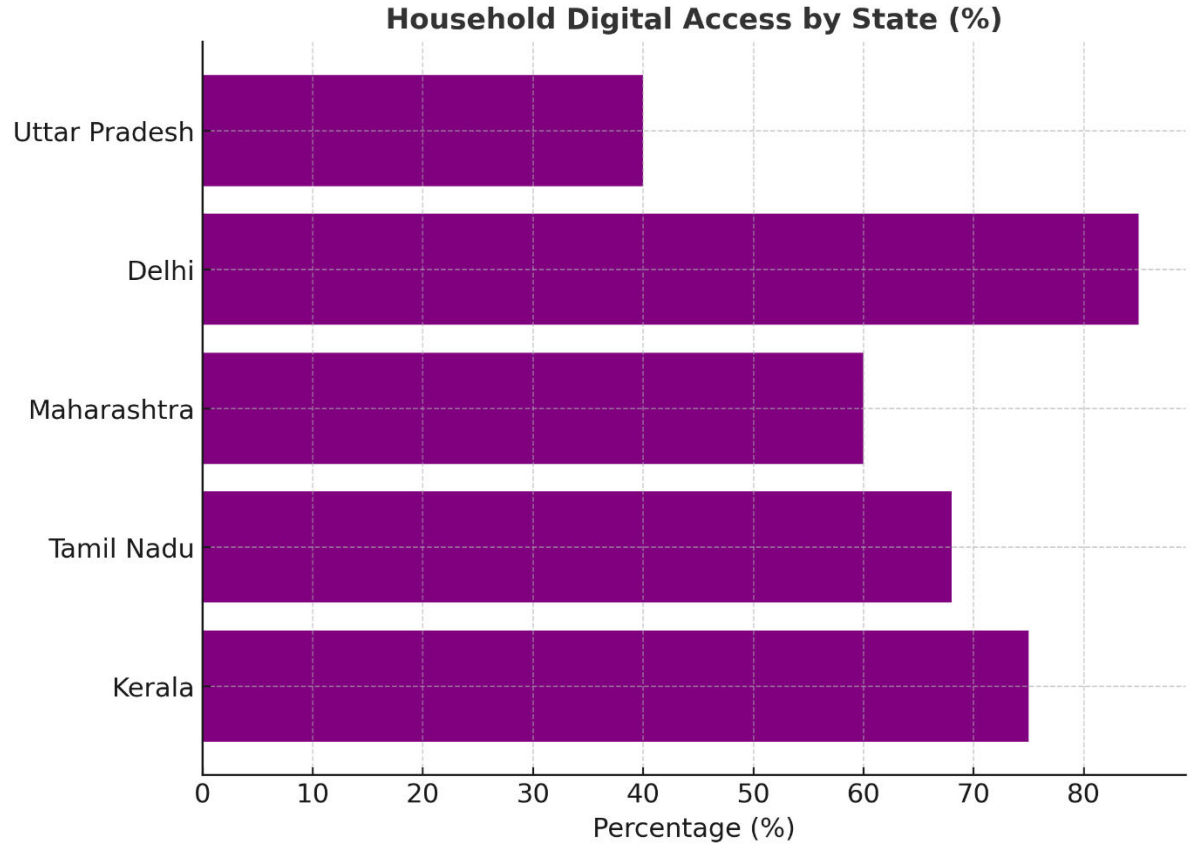

Figure 4: Digital access disparities showing rural–urban gaps.

5.4 Inclusion for Children with Special Needs (CwSN)

NEP 2020 highlights inclusive education as a non-negotiable principle. Yet state responses remain fragmented.

Table 6: CwSN Support Services

State	Special Educators per 100 Schools	Assistive Device Coverage (%)	Inclusive Classrooms (%)	Key Observations
Kerala	14	78	81	Institutionalized inclusion practices.
Uttar Pradesh	6	32	35	Acute shortage of supports.
Delhi	10	60	65	Progressive, but needs scaling.
Bihar	5	28	30	Minimal provision.
Maharashtra	9	52	55	Moderate integration.

The data demonstrates that despite NEP's inclusive rhetoric, children with disabilities continue to be marginalized due to insufficient specialized resources.

5.5 Governance, Accountability, and Equity Outcomes

Governance mechanisms underpin NEP implementation. States with stronger accountability frameworks show better educational outcomes.

Table 7: Governance and Accountability

State	School Monitoring Visits (per year)	Transparency Score (0–10)	Community Participation Index	Key Observations
Kerala	12	9.1	High	Robust monitoring.
Uttar Pradesh	4	5.3	Low	Weak accountability.
Delhi	10	8.2	High	Effective oversight.
Bihar	5	5.6	Medium	Improving slowly.
Maharashtra	8	7.5	Medium	Stable governance.

Table 8: Equity Outcomes

State	Gender Parity Index (GPI)	SC/ST Enrollment (%)	Rural–Urban Gap Index (0–1)	Key Observations
Kerala	1.02	32	0.18	Near parity, reduced gaps.
Uttar Pradesh	0.89	18	0.42	Persistent inequities.
Delhi	0.97	22	0.25	Improving inclusivity.
Bihar	0.91	20	0.39	Significant rural–urban divide.
Maharashtra	0.95	26	0.28	Gradual progress.

The tables collectively highlight that governance strength and accountability are correlated with better inclusivity and reduced inequities. States with weak institutional mechanisms risk leaving marginalized populations behind.

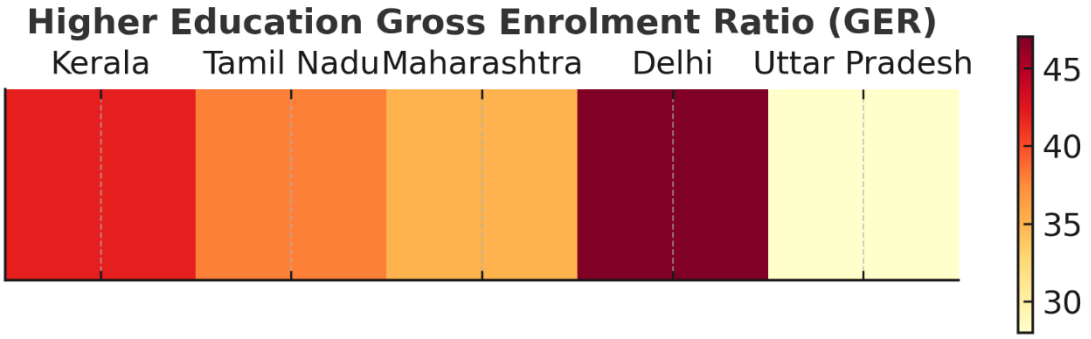

Figure 5: Gross Enrollment Ratio in higher education under FYUGP reforms.

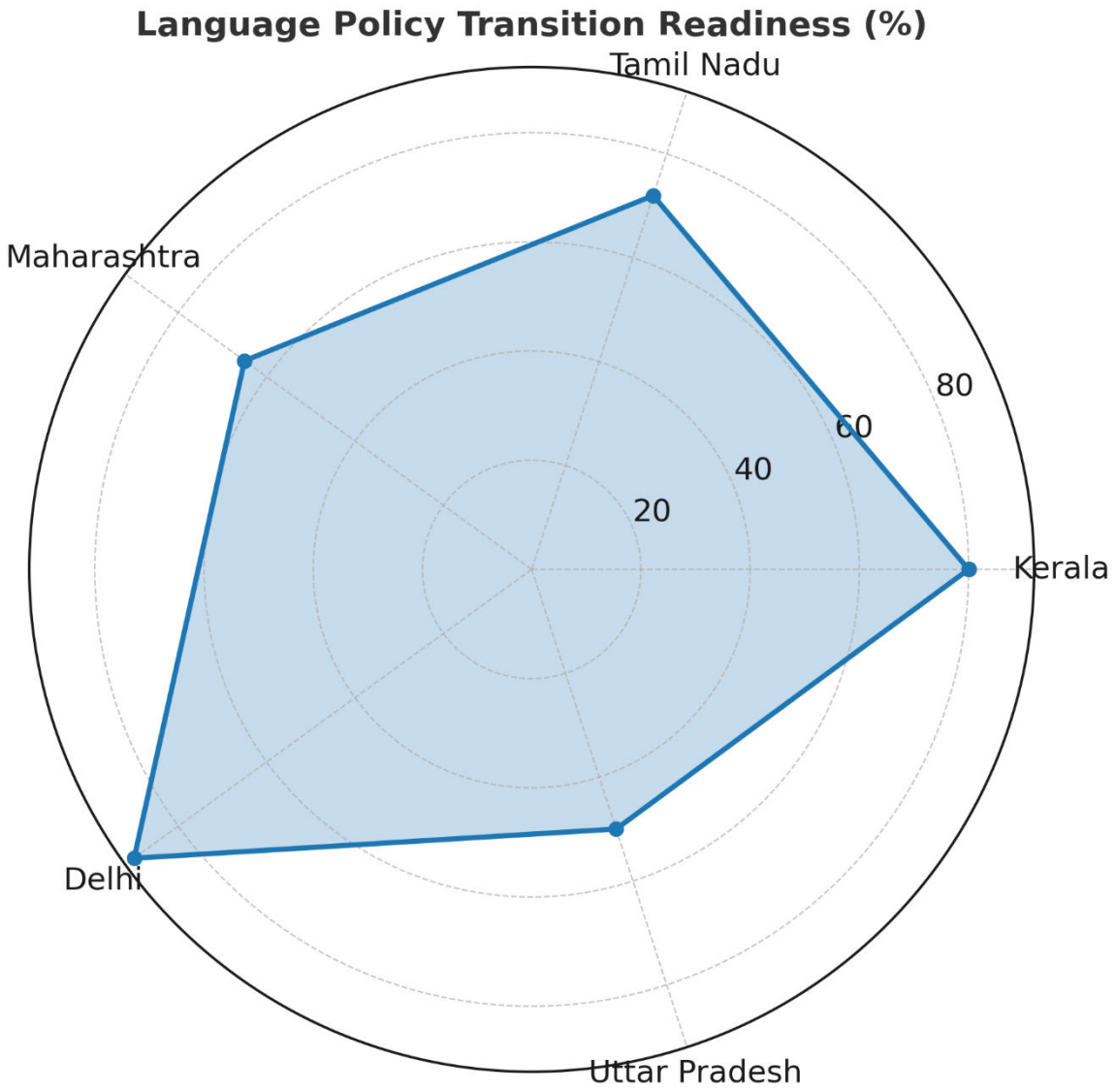

Figure 6: Language readiness radar mapping states' transition to three-language policy.

5.6 Synthesis of Discussion

Across all dimensions, the evidence suggests a systemic paradox. The NEP 2020 embodies visionary promises, but financing shortfalls, teacher shortages, infrastructural deficits, digital divides, and weak governance create implementation bottlenecks. While states like Kerala and Delhi are on trajectories that resonate with NEP's aspirations, large states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar risk perpetuating exclusion. Without addressing these systemic bottlenecks, NEP's transformative intent may remain aspirational rather than achievable.

6. Policy Roadmap for Equity-Sensitive Implementation of NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 embodies a transformative vision of inclusive, flexible, and future-ready education. Yet, the distance between its aspirations and on-the-ground realities demands a carefully sequenced roadmap that integrates systemic preparedness with local adaptability. A policy roadmap must go beyond broad directives and instead identify actionable pathways that explicitly address barriers of inequity, resource asymmetry, and governance bottlenecks. The following subsections delineate a structured approach for implementation.

6.1 Sequenced Implementation

NEP 2020's comprehensiveness requires phasing to avoid overburdening state governments and institutions. A sequenced approach ensures that foundational enablers—such as teacher preparation, infrastructure, and digital access—are prioritized before complex reforms such as higher education restructuring or competency-based assessment are scaled.

- **Phase I (0–3 years):** Focus on strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), digital infrastructure rollout in underserved areas, and capacity-building of teachers.
- **Phase II (3–6 years):** Expansion of school restructuring (5+3+3+4 design), implementation of three-language policy, and competency-based curricula integration.
- **Phase III (6–10 years):** Full adoption of FYUGP model in higher education, accreditation reforms, and global benchmarking of research and innovation ecosystems.

This sequencing ensures that equity-focused investments precede structural transformation, thus preventing policy-induced exclusion.

6.2 Financing Equity

Financing remains the most critical determinant of inclusive implementation. While the policy targets public expenditure on education at 6% of GDP, most states remain below 4%. A dedicated **Equity Financing Index (EFI)** should be institutionalized to allocate funds based on socio-economic disadvantage, rurality, and gender parity indicators.

- States with higher Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and minority populations must receive differential funding allocations.
- Ring-fenced funding for digital equity and special needs education should be embedded in Samagra Shiksha allocations.
- A mid-term **Public Expenditure Review Mechanism** would track compliance and flag underperforming states.

6.3 Teacher Preparation and Professionalization

The success of NEP hinges on teachers, yet India faces both shortages and uneven quality of training. Policy must emphasize:

- Universal pre-service teacher education through four-year integrated B.Ed. programs.
- Continuous professional development (CPD) linked to career progression, incentivizing quality teaching.
- Deployment of technology-enabled teacher training platforms (e.g., DIKSHA 2.0) with regional language support.

An outcome-based teacher accountability framework, aligned with student learning outcomes, would strengthen systemic efficacy.

6.4 Digital Equity and Technology Integration

Digitalization is both an opportunity and a risk for inclusion. The roadmap should address divides through:

- Subsidized access to devices and high-speed internet in rural districts.
- Public–private partnerships for localized e-content creation in multiple languages.
- Establishing **National Digital Inclusion Missions** targeting first-generation learners and differently-abled students.

This ensures that technology does not exacerbate stratification but instead acts as a social equalizer.

6.5 Governance and Institutional Accountability

The current governance system suffers from overlapping jurisdictions and weak accountability. Reform requires:

- Establishment of an **Independent State Education Regulatory Authority (SERA)** to standardize quality benchmarks.
- Strengthening School Management Committees (SMCs) with genuine community participation and fiscal oversight powers.
- Decentralized monitoring systems that integrate real-time UDISE+ data for transparent performance tracking.

This would reduce bureaucratic inertia and enhance participatory governance.

6.6 Equity-Sensitive Higher Education Transformation

The transition to multidisciplinary higher education institutions (HEIs) and the Four-Year Undergraduate Program (FYUGP) must be equity-sensitive. Without safeguards, marginalized students may face higher dropout risks.

- Scholarship and fee-waiver schemes tied to disadvantaged groups must be expanded.
- Flexible entry–exit options should be backed by **credit portability platforms** accessible nationwide.
- Regional resource hubs should support smaller colleges to prevent exclusion in rural areas.

6.7 Policy Synergy and Intersectoral Coordination

Education cannot be reformed in isolation. Health, nutrition, and social protection schemes are essential complements.

- Integration of school education with **mid-day meal expansion, health check-ups, and mental health services**.
- Convergence with digital skilling initiatives under Ministry of Skill Development to ensure smooth school-to-work transition.

Such synergies prevent fragmentation and ensure holistic development.

6.8 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adaptive Policy Feedback

An inclusive roadmap must embed continuous evaluation to recalibrate strategies.

- Introduction of **Equity Audits** across states, focusing on gender, caste, and regional disparities.
- Public dashboards highlighting progress on NEP 2020 targets, enabling social accountability.
- Adaptive policy cycles that incorporate feedback from teachers, students, and communities.

This ensures NEP evolves dynamically with implementation realities.

The promises of NEP 2020 can only be realized if its rollout is grounded in equity, sequencing, and adaptive governance. By adopting a phased and context-sensitive roadmap, India can bridge the gap between aspirational policy and inclusive practice. Without such deliberate planning, NEP risks reproducing systemic inequalities rather than dismantling them. The proposed roadmap emphasizes that inclusivity is not a by-product of reform but its very precondition.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this paper highlights that the transformative vision of the National Education Policy 2020 can only be realized through deliberate, equity-sensitive strategies that move beyond rhetoric to grounded action. Comparative evidence from states, supported by quantitative indicators, reveals deep asymmetries in access to infrastructure, digital connectivity, teacher quality, and financing. Without addressing these inequities, large sections of marginalized learners risk being excluded from the policy's benefits, thereby undermining its stated goals of inclusivity and excellence.

The proposed sequenced roadmap emphasizes the importance of phasing reforms in a manner that prioritizes foundational literacy, teacher preparation, digital access, and financing equity before advancing toward systemic restructuring. This sequencing, coupled with ring-fenced funds and robust accountability frameworks, is crucial to prevent the uneven rollout of reforms. Equally important is the recognition that education cannot be treated in isolation: integration with health, nutrition, and skill development programs is necessary to ensure holistic outcomes for learners.

Overall, the paper underscores that the success of NEP 2020 lies not merely in policy design but in adaptive implementation. A strong culture of monitoring, evidence-based mid-course corrections, and participatory governance will determine whether the policy evolves into a transformative driver of social mobility or risks becoming another aspirational blueprint with limited real impact. If executed with foresight, equity, and collaboration, NEP 2020 can become a milestone in India's educational journey, shaping a generation that is not only skilled but also empowered to contribute meaningfully to a knowledge-driven and inclusive economy

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