

# Multicultural Inclusion in the Indian Education System: Policy Promises and Ground Realities

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## Abstract

The education policies played a crucial role in a child's overall development and prepared them for the future world. India being a multicultural country, the post-independence education policies are framed in such a way that they value and respect each culture, tradition, and language. This review paper critically examines the role of education policies and recommendations ranging from the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49) to the National Education Policy (2020) in creating a fair and just environment so that each child feels secure and valued in the classroom. Though the recommendations and policies have extensively emphasized democratic citizenship and linguistic diversity along with the inclusion of marginalized groups such as girls, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and children with special needs, we identified the gap between the policies' vision and their ground realities with reference to the UDISE data. The NEP (2020) showed a transformational shift in the educational field by integrating culturally responsive teaching and aligning the principles with the sustainable development goal (SDG4). Thus, this paper underscores the need for the commitment to have sustained implementation, continuous monitoring, and stakeholder participation for realizing multicultural and equitable classrooms.

**Keywords:** Multicultural Inclusion, Inclusive Classrooms, Marginalized Groups, and Equity & Access

## 1.0 Introduction

India is known for its rich culture embracing multiple languages, religions, and socio-cultural practices. In such settings, diversity significantly shapes the learner and is reflected in their academic performances. So, it is essential to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2015, p.1). The importance of inclusive classroom perspectives is reflected in the World Bank's (2018) i.e. "all for learning," which comprises three complementary strategies: learning outcomes, acting on evidence, and coordinating stakeholders to create equitable learning environments (p. 16). Banks (2015) highlighted the importance of pedagogy that is grounded within the cultural experiences and enriches students learning. Ladson-Billing (1995) also argues that culturally relevant pedagogy ensures students feel secure and valued in the classroom, and enhance their academic

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performance. Similarly, Geneva Gay (2010) addresses the need of diverse learners and gave importance to culturally responsive practices. Neito (2017) highlighted that the educational system often indulges in access and enrolment and fails to address deeper issues of cultural representativeness and inclusivity. This highlights the importance of both the inclusion of policy and classroom practices.

The NEP (2020) clearly addresses the work of the previous education policies (1986/1992), which mainly dealt with only access and equity of the disadvantaged groups, and their work is partially completed. However, building upon the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, the NEP (2020) ensures the creation of an inclusive education system. This review paper critically examines the major educational commissions and policies, including the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49), the Mudaliar Commission (1952-53), the Kothari Commission (1964-66), the National Policy on Education (1968), the National Policy on Education (1986/1992), and the National Education Policy (2020), in shaping the educational reforms and multicultural inclusive classrooms. Through these educational commissions and policies, the Indian government promotes democracy and social and racial harmony (Sheikh et al., 2020). In this context, this paper critically explores the Indian educational policies related to multicultural inclusion and highlights the need for a more comprehensive practice-oriented approach to multicultural education in India.

## **2.0 Objectives of the study**

1. To explore the policy concern regarding the multicultural inclusion in the Indian education system.
2. To identify the gap between the policy provisions and the classroom realities in implementation of multicultural inclusion.

## **3.0 Historical Review of Indian Education Policies (1948-2020)**

### **3.1 Post-Independence Commission and Multicultural Foundations**

#### **3.1.1 Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49)**

The University Education Commission has a broader vision of national integration and building a democratic citizenship. Education should provide them knowledge about their own culture along with other cultures and promote unity in diversity. Radhakrishnan commission gave importance to mother tongue and Indian regional languages to make students connected to the diverse class and reflect the ideas of respecting linguistic diversity, which is one of the main aspects in building inclusive classrooms.

#### **3.1.2 Mudaliar Commission (1952-53)**

The Secondary Education Commission focuses to restructure secondary education to be more flexible, relevant, and inclusive. The idea of “totality of experience” has been mention in the commission where education should not be within the textbooks only rather it must be connected with the student’s life, needs and their interest. The commissions further emphasis on the mother tongue and regional languages as the medium of instructions. Also, the Mudaliar

commission highlighted the importance of integrating the diversity of culture in the curriculum and develop a sense of democratic values.

### **3.1.3 Kothari Commission (1964-66)**

The Education Commission is a landmark in shaping India's education system. One of the most important ideas of the commission was equalisation of educational opportunity which connects with the principles of multicultural inclusion. The commission also emphasises on the common school system where every child come under one umbrella and develop respect for diversity. Furthermore, the commission gave importance to three-language formula, local culture, history and heritage of India. The commission regards education as the powerful tool for promoting social and ethical values and strengthening democracy (Aalam & Selvan, 2022).

## **3.2 National Policies on Education and Implementation of Inclusion**

### **3.2.1 National Policy on Education (1968)**

The framework of Nation Policy on Education (1968) based on the Kothari commission and is known as the first official education policy after Independent India. The ideas of multicultural inclusion have been used in the policy such as, diversity, equality, inclusion and equity. Aalam and Selvan (2022) mentioned in their study that the policy emphasises on the promotion of education to marginalized group such as, girls, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minority groups the disparities in the society we faced will be reduced. Furthermore, Sheikh et al. (2020) highlighted that the NPE (1968) supports the working adults and labourers by providing literacy programs, i.e., basic reading, writing, and numeracy. Additionally, the policy recommended three-language formula promoting the balance between Hindi, English, and regional languages (Sheikh et al., 2020). NEP (1968) also emphasises on the equal education opportunity, multilingualism, national integration and cultural respect.

### **3.2.2 National Policy on Education (1986: Revised 1992)**

The National Policy on Education (1986) and later modified through the Program of Actions (1992) are significant policy frameworks in Indian education system. The NPE (1986) also highlighted preserving the values of secularism, socialism, and equality (Aalam & Selvan, 2022). Additionally, the NPE (1986) took initiatives to introduce Navodaya Vidyalaya for the rural students, Operation Blackboard to improve infrastructure, improve women's education and learning environment, and promote universal access to education, especially to marginalized groups, including girls and SC and ST students. The policy also states that education is a tool to break the barriers that were faced by the women, poor children and marginalised people in the past and ensures ample opportunities and equal status in society (MHRD, 2022). The (1992) revision led to emphasis on the decentralization of education planning, equity, and community participation, ensuring inclusiveness in education. The policy further underscores a common curriculum that includes duties and rights protected in the constitution, India's freedom struggle, and knowledge that develops a sense of national identity, along with the adaptation of additional subjects and activities based on local needs and cultural context (Sheikh et al., 2020).

### **3.2.3 National Education Policy (2020)**

The National Education Policy is considered as the most comprehensive and holistic policy with a vision of an inclusivity, equitability and accessibility in the education settings. NEP (2020) emphasises instructions in mother-tongue, equity-focused interventions for marginalised groups, flexible curricula, experiential learning, and integration of local culture and heritage, and Indian knowledge system in the education. The NEP (2020) refers to SDG4 while maintaining India's traditions and value systems and aligning the aspirational goals of the 21st century. The policy further gave emphasis on the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions among learners and teachers. Moreover, NEP (2020) supports regional languages to bridge learning disparities and addresses the socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and build respect for cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion in the school. Banks (2010) explains that multicultural education should be accessible to all students "regardless of their gender, social class, and ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics" (p. 3). This conceptual grounding echoes the NEP (2020) vision of learning for all, which included the SEDGs. SEDGs are explicitly categorized based on gender identities, socio-cultural identities, geographical identities, disabilities, and socio-economic conditions (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 24). Considering these views significantly highlights the importance of integrating diverse cultures into the curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher training and creates an inclusive school environment.

### **4.0 Policy Concerns for Multicultural Inclusion in Indian Education**

The principles of Multicultural inclusion have always been in the frame of Indian education policies such as the Kothari Commission (1964), the National Policy on Education (1968), the National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Education Policy (2020). These policies make a strong base for equity, equality, inclusion, social justice and respect for diversity within educational settings. Without recognising the needs of marginalised groups such as; scheduled castes, scheduled tribe, minorities, women and differently abled person the policies struggle to provide equal educational opportunities. The Kothari Commission recommended the development of Common School System ensuring equal access and opportunities to all students. This concern continues with the vision of the Right to Education Act (2009), by providing free and compulsory education. Another significant concern is respecting the linguistic diversity which has been significantly introduced by The National Policy on Education (1968) the Three-Language Formula and promoted multilingualism and national integration. Additionally, the National Education Policy (2020) strongly recommended the use of mother tongue and regional languages as the medium of instruction in early education. The policy further highlighted the importance of preserving cultural identity and value education. Also, the policy NEP (2020) moves beyond traditional focus on access, enrolment and equal opportunity and gave stronger attention to multicultural inclusion within school environment (Ministry of Education, 2020).

### **5.0 Discussions & Critical Review**

The National Curriculum Framework (2005), developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), operationalized all the former commission's

recommendations and visions of the policies at the classroom level and focused primarily on the child's needs, inclusivity, and multicultural pedagogy. The NCF (2005) designed the curriculum in such a way that it showed respect and valued the diverse cultures. In addition to this, the NCF 2005 makes transformations in the pedagogical approach and improves critical thinking and experiential learning. The NCF (2005) also advocates a child's home language as central in enhancing learning along with national integration. The vision is supported by the Ministry of Education and established specialized language institutions like the Central Institute of Indian Languages (1969), the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (1958; later renamed English and Foreign Languages University in 2007), the Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan (1970), and the Kendriya Hindi Sansthan (1960), reflecting the respect of India's linguistic diversity and cultural preservation (Khaparde, 2002). This shows a progressive struggle towards an inclusive school environment.

Apart from these, the study highlighted the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), especially for the disadvantaged groups such as girls, SC, ST, and the total Enrolment of Children with Special Needs (CWSN), because by examining these marginalised groups we can evaluate the policies' effectiveness in promoting equity and inclusion and their contribution in developing inclusive multicultural classrooms. The data (2019-20) showed that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 38.5 million students, with 19.6 million boys and 18.9 million girls, showing nearly equal participation of girls and boys. There was a tremendous increase in GER from 11% in 2005-06 to 27.3% in 2019-20 (MHRD, 2022, p. 332). Despite the gender disparity having been largely reduced, we still need to work for equitable access and equal educational opportunity in terms of categories. The GER of SC students in higher education are 12.27%, and for ST students it is 4.38% in (2012-12), and in (2019-20) the GER of SC students are just 14.68%, and for ST students it is 5.59%. The UDISE report (2014-15) showed that the GER of SC and ST students in school education has been decreasing. At the elementary level the GER of SC students are 112.80 and 108.80 for ST students; at the secondary level the GER of SC students are 82 and 72.16 for ST students; and at the higher secondary level it's 48.36 for SC and 35.54 for ST students. Similarly, the UDISE report (2019-20) displays that the gap exists in the Enrolment rate in schools at different levels. At the elementary level, the GER of SC students are 107.09 and 102.08 for ST students; at the secondary level, the GER of SC is 83.02 and 76.72 for ST students; and at the higher secondary level, the GER is 52.89 for SC and 42.89 for ST students. The UDISE report (2012-15) showed the Enrolment of children with special needs (CWSN) students at the elementary level is 2313303, at the secondary level it's 219571, and at the higher secondary level it's 61046. Similarly, as per the UDISE report (2018-19), the Enrolment of CWSN students at the elementary level is 1785061, at the secondary level it's 247788, and at the higher secondary level it's 78648. Though the Right to Education Act 2009 includes (CWSN) in free and compulsory education, we see the disparities still exist in the Enrolment rate (MHRD, 2022).

Furthermore, the annual report of MHRD (2022) mentioned that the NEP (2020) recognized the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the hilly regions and allocated 10% of the annual budget to higher education. Parallely under the Prime Minister's New 15 Point Programme, the Education of Minorities program is implemented and ensures equity, access, and quality education by providing scholarships for minority students at all levels of education,

establishing educational institutions in minority-concentrated districts, and promoting Urdu and other minority languages. Thus, through these data, it clearly indicates that our education commissions and policies have envisioned equitable access and equal opportunities but lack in the practical aspects. However, after the completion of one year of the NEP (2020), several initiatives were taken to promote the linguistic and cultural diversity in education, such as teaching technical courses in regional languages to support the students to learn in their mother tongue, Indian Sign Language as a subject to understand the culture and language of differently abled students, and the VidyaPravesh-School Preparation Module to help the culturally diverse students and prepare them for school (MHRD, 2022). With these initiatives, teachers' readiness, and continuous monitoring of the implementations, the NEP (2020) achieves its goal and provides a strong foundation for a multicultural, inclusive classroom environment in the real world. Thus, it can be argued that Indian education policies have a strong foundation in promoting multicultural and inclusive education, but their success largely depends on effective implementation, teacher preparedness, and continuous monitoring. Bridging this gap is essential for creating truly inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Multicultural inclusion is one of the essentials for creating democratic and equitable education system. An inclusive multicultural approach also develops empathy, tolerance, mutual respect, and a broader understanding of diversity along with the promotion of equality and social justice. In the Indian classroom context, multicultural inclusion strengthens the national unity and integrity while respecting cultural differences. Thus, there is requirements for the active policy makers, curriculum planners, teachers and stakeholders to work together to create an inclusive learning environment that celebrates diversity and provide equal opportunities for all learners. Also, by integrating multicultural principles in education system, it successfully challenges the social issues and promote respect, equity and inclusion in schools.

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