

NEP 2020 and Tribal Education: Challenges and Opportunities in Secondary Schooling

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the difficulties as well as the possibilities of secondary education for the tribal population, considering the provisions of the National Education Policy 2020, using a qualitative research design. The purpose was to examine the access-related, quality-related, socio-economic, institutional, and policy aspects of education for tribal communities. Data collection techniques involved the use of in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation and document analysis of the participants, which included students, teachers, parents and other community members. It has been noted that despite the improvement in enrolment rates in secondary education, some challenges, such as remoteness of the location, absence of transport facilities and inconsistent attendance, still exist. Several issues, such as a lack of qualified teachers, poor infrastructure, and language issues, affected the quality of education. There were also some socio-economic problems that were reported, which contributed to the lack of educational process of the students. Nonetheless, in spite of these issues, certain main points of NEP 2020 have become evident in the paper. Flexible curriculum, vocational training, and focus on holistic and inclusive education are some of the primary areas. The research established that the policy is indeed a good model but its implementation depends on its contextual use.

Keywords: Tribal Education, Secondary Schooling, National Education Policy 2020, Qualitative Study, Educational Challenges, Educational Opportunities

INTRODUCTION

It is universally accepted that education is one of the basic forces of social change, economic growth, and personal empowerment. It is important in alleviating inequalities and ensuring inclusive growth especially to the marginalized communities. Education is a key tool that can help overcome the gaps and promote equitable development in a diverse country such as India, where socio-cultural and economic differences are wide-spread (Patra et al., 2025). Out of the many levels of education, secondary education is of particular interest because it serves as the basis of higher education and career advancement as well as jobs. India has Scheduled Tribes that are known as tribal communities which take up a large percentage of population and are characterized by their distinct cultural identity, traditions and languages. These communities are still at a disadvantage in terms of education despite constitutional protection and special development programs. The tribal students have a complex set of challenges, such as geographical isolation, poverty, low parental literacy, and poor access to good educational resources (Mahata, 2024). Consequently, their involvement in secondary education has been relatively low, and dropout rates are rather high. The National Education Policy 2020 has paved the way to revolutionizing the education sector in India. The main focus of the policy is the provision of inclusive and equitable education whereby all children irrespective of their economic or cultural backgrounds should be provided with quality education. This involves minimizing the rate of dropout among school-going children, enhancing learning skills, promoting holism and skills-based learning programs, particularly for economically marginalized sections of society such as the tribes (Bramhane, 2024).

Regarding tribal education, there are various provisions by the National Education Policy 2020 which are anticipated to alleviate problems currently affecting tribal education. Some of these include the use of the mother

tongue/regional language in the initial stages of education, incorporation of vocational training in the curriculum, flexibility in the curriculum development process, and promotion of experiential learning.

However, the actual implementation of such provisions in the tribal areas poses various problems. Problems like lack of infrastructure facilities, lack of availability of qualified teachers, lack of information among other problems persist, which hinders the achievement of policy goals. Economic factors and responsibilities at home make the tribal students leave education prematurely. In light of all these, there is the need to critically analyse the state of secondary education among the tribal community and analyse the impact of policies such as NEP 2020 on secondary education in the tribal community. The use of a qualitative research design in this situation becomes pertinent since it will allow one to get a deeper insight into the actual situation among the various stakeholders. Hence, this research endeavour seeks to explore the possibilities and challenges related to the problem of tribal secondary education in light of NEP 2020. This paper seeks to find out what obstacles are there to prevent tribal children from accessing secondary education, as well as the role played by various institutions in this situation. Moreover, the research aims at finding solutions for overcoming problems associated with tribal secondary education by studying the possibilities of applying policies to this end.

To sum up, increasing the effectiveness of secondary education among tribesmen plays an important role not only in terms of personal development but also for the development of society in general. Implementation of NEP 2020 has an immense potential in transforming the entire educational system. Nevertheless, the success of this process greatly hinges on whether or not the real difficulties on the ground can be dealt with.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate the barriers and prospects associated with the implementation of the National Education Policy of 2020 in the realm of secondary education among tribes. This research design seemed ideal since it provided an opportunity for gaining a deep insight into the experiences, perceptions, and realities related to the stakeholders of tribal education.

Nature of the Study

The study was qualitative, both in terms of interpretivism and phenomenology, since the study focused on how the views of tribal students, teachers, and communities towards secondary education in NEP 2020 were formed.

Study Area

This study was carried out in selected areas dominated by tribes (such as rural and distant places) where the availability of secondary education is still difficult. The selection of the area depends on the high percentage of tribals and the status of implementing NEP 2020 provisions.

Participants of the Study

The participants included key stakeholders associated with secondary education:

- Tribal students (Classes IX and X)
- School teachers
- Headmasters
- Parents
- Community leaders

The total number of participants was 5 to get deeper insights rather than larger numbers to represent the population.

Sampling Technique

The study utilised purposive sampling, whereby participants who had firsthand knowledge of the secondary education of tribes were selected. Furthermore, snowball sampling was employed in the selection of other respondents by referral.

Sources of Data

The study relied entirely on **qualitative primary and secondary data**:

- **Primary data:** Gained from interviews, conversations, and observations
- **Secondary data:** Policy documents (NEP 2020), governmental reports, and scholarly studies from previous years

Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

The following qualitative tools were used:

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interview schedules were used to gather data from students, teachers, and parents on problems and prospects in secondary education

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were carried out using groups of students and people from the community so that group perceptions and cultural factors could be understood.

Observation Method

The non-participant observation method was adopted for the evaluation of school infrastructure, classroom settings, and learning process.

Document Analysis

Policy documents and other reports related to the topic were thoroughly reviewed for an understanding of how NEP 2020 is being implemented at tribal schools.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved visits to selected institutions. Permissions were sought from the institutions before embarking on the research. The purpose of the study was clearly articulated to all those who took part in the research. The interviews were conducted flexibly and in a culturally sensitive way.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved:

1. Interpretation of interview and discussion results.
2. Response coding into categories.

3. Identification of themes and patterns
4. Discussion of the results regarding NEP 2020.

The study was carried out by trying to identify the various themes that emerged, which include access, quality, inclusivity, and challenges and opportunities of secondary education.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility and reliability of findings, the study followed:

- **Triangulation:** Using multiple data sources and methods
- **Member checking:** Validating responses with participants
- **Thick description:** Providing detailed contextual explanations

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were adhered to during the entire process of the study. Participants were aware of the objective of the study, and participation was on voluntary basis. Anonymity was assured, and data were used only for educational purposes.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was confined to certain tribal areas and was conducted in secondary schools alone. Qualitative data were used in the study, which makes generalisation to all tribal communities impossible.

RESULTS

This chapter described the research results, which were obtained from qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used in the data analysis, and this enabled the identification of patterns that were relevant to the adoption of the NEP 2020 in tribal secondary education. The research results were classified under different themes relating to the status, challenges, and opportunities in secondary education for tribal children.

Table 1: Coding Framework for Thematic Analysis

Codes	Categories	Themes
School distance, transport	Physical access barriers	Access and Enrolment
Attendance, dropout	Participation issues	Access and Enrolment
Teacher shortage, methods	Teaching-learning issues	Quality of Education
Language difficulty	Learning barriers	Quality of Education
Poverty, parental illiteracy	Socio-economic factors	Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers
Household work, early marriage	Cultural practices	Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers
Lack of facilities	Infrastructure issues	Institutional Constraints
Teacher workload	Administrative challenges	Institutional Constraints

Vocational learning	Skill development	Opportunities under NEP 2020
Flexible curriculum	Policy benefits	Opportunities under NEP 2020

Thematic Analysis of Findings

The analysis resulted in the identification of five major themes:

1. Access and Enrolment
2. Quality of Education
3. Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers
4. Institutional and Infrastructural Constraints
5. Opportunities under NEP 2020

Theme 1: Access and Enrolment

It was brought out that enrolment of tribal students in secondary education had experienced an improvement due to government policies and interventions. Respondents indicated that schemes such as free education, mid-day meals, and uniform distributions had helped them to be in schools (Pajankar, 2023). However, they were not equally accessible, particularly in the rural regions, which were too distant to the school.

Table 2: Findings on Access and Enrolment

Sub-theme	Key Observations
School Accessibility	Schools located far from tribal settlements
Attendance	Majority regular, but irregular cases present
Dropout Risk	Economic pressure and distance influence dropout

Physical access, transportation problems, and geographic location still posed barriers to attending regularly. These results are in agreement with earlier studies, which have shown that while participation has increased, access continues to be a problem for people living in tribal communities (Mishra & Mishra, 2024).

Theme 2: Quality of Education

The quality of education was a major issue highlighted by the participants. The inadequacy in the supply of competent teachers, lack of specialization in topics taught, and unimaginative approaches in teaching were noted by both the teachers and students. The majority of the learners indicated challenges in comprehending the educational curriculum taught in a foreign language.

Table 3: Findings on Quality of Education

Sub-theme	Key Observations
Teacher Availability	Shortage of subject-specific teachers
Teaching Methods	Limited use of innovative methods
Language Issues	Difficulty in understanding the medium of instruction

Observation showed that although basic facilities were present, the environment for learning lacked sufficient educational facilities like libraries, labs, and technological inputs. Such findings were consistent with the work of Behera & Behera (2024), who have found that poor infrastructure and a shortage of teachers adversely impact education in tribal schools.

Theme 3: Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers

Social and cultural influences on educational enrollment were noted to be significant. Poverty was noted to be among the main factors that hindered education. The majority of learners were noted to be forced to generate income for the family or help in other duties at home. Poorly educated parents were another key hindrance to education for most of the students.

Culture, early marriages, and lack of awareness about the importance of education were also identified to impact enrollment levels. The language barrier was another issue that caused numerous indigenous learners to be unable to deal with lessons delivered in foreign languages. All these conformed with Mahapatra's observation (2024).

Theme 4: Institutional and Infrastructural Constraints

Several institutional barriers were found, and they are poor school infrastructure, poor transport facilities and an unbalanced teacher-student ratio. Even though there were basic amenities, which included classroom facilities and drinking water, there were no elaborate facilities like library, playgrounds and computer lab.

Table 4: Socio-Economic and Cultural Constraints

Sub-theme	Key Observations
Poverty	Students engaged in work activities
Parental Education	Low literacy limits academic support
Cultural Practices	Early marriage and traditional roles
Language Barrier	Native language differs from school language

Administrative issues like workload, non-provision of training, and insufficient support for new policies were also cited by teachers. This was aligned with previous research on the topic, which found that infrastructural problems posed a key challenge to quality education among tribal communities (Inderberg & Eikeland, 2009).

Theme 5: Opportunities under NEP 2020

However, the study identified various opportunities that emerged as a result of implementing the National Education Policy 2020. The participants pointed out the possible advantages of having flexible curricula, vocational training, and mother tongue-based teaching programs (Smitha, 2020).

Table 5: Institutional Challenges

Sub-theme	Key Observations
Infrastructure	Lack of libraries and playgrounds
Facilities	Basic facilities available but limited
Teacher Workload	High workload affects teaching quality

The teachers were quite positive about the competency-based approach and the holistic development approach, which is suggested in the NEP 2020. The inclusion concept as well as the decrease in the dropout rate in the NEP 2020, is viewed to be one of the important aspects in improving tribal education.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The theme-based analysis shows that there is indeed some progress in terms of access to secondary education of the tribal population, but there are several difficulties in their way. Social and economic issues, cultural issues, and institutional problems prevent the tribes from having quality education. However, at the same time, NEP 2020 offers a good solution.

In general, the results showed that NEP 2020 is only going to be successful in the context of tribes with regard to certain factors.

DISCUSSION

Secondary education issues among tribal children have been investigated using a qualitative methodology within the context of the National Education Policy 2020. The results obtained indicated the complexity of several issues such as access, quality, socio-cultural, and institutional aspects that affected the learning process. The following interpretation of results will take into account the literature analysis on the topic.

The results suggested that the access to secondary education among tribal communities had been improved; however, it is still difficult for children to attend secondary classes because of some difficulties connected with reaching them (Kumar & Singh, 2025). For example, long distances to schools were mentioned by interviewees and could not be overcome without appropriate means of transport. Such conclusions coincide with previous studies which proved that geographical distance played an important role when talking about secondary education among tribal children. Thus, although enrolment rates increased because of certain policies, further improvement is necessary regarding school attendance.

In the area of quality of education, the current research identified some constraints that hinder the learning process. In particular, lack of adequate teachers, deficiency of knowledge in certain subjects, and ineffective methods of teaching remain problems for learning. Moreover, students had difficulties understanding what was said because of language differences existing at home and at schools (Patil & Kolte, 2024). Such issues have already been discussed before, as earlier research showed that deficiencies in teaching quality and resource availability considerably influence academic performance. Therefore, the presented study confirms the idea that only increasing access to education would be of no use without raising the quality of teaching as well.

Socioeconomic conditions of students turned out to be an important factor that affects not only willingness to obtain education but also results achieved. In particular, poverty, inability of parents to read and write, and involvement of students in economic activity of families proved to be serious barriers for students in obtaining higher achievements. The presented issues confirm the statement made in previous research that family conditions considerably affect educational outcomes.

Factors of culture and language have also been found to be influential in the learning process. The study also revealed that language barriers and cultural customs influenced the participation of the students in the learning process (Yadav, 2024). Indeed, students belonging to the tribe had problems understanding the dominant language, which influenced their involvement in lessons. It should also be noted that numerous studies indicate the impact of cultural differences in the home environment on children's ability to get knowledge. Based on this, the need to create culturally responsive pedagogical practices and to teach in indigenous languages is crucial.

Lack of some infrastructures has been found to affect the performance of schooling. In particular, despite the fact that the basic facilities were offered, like classrooms and drinking water, libraries and playgrounds were not widespread, and the absence of modern technologies also impacted the performance of the students in schools adversely (Jadhav & Narayan, 2023). It should be emphasised that previous studies have also pointed out the

importance of infrastructure and efficient administration of schools. Hence, this conclusion of the present paper also correlates with the current body of scientific evidence.

In addition, the study revealed various opportunities that arose as a result of the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 (Amin). The teachers and the students observed flexibility of curriculum, vocational training and inclusiveness positively. The policy of promoting skills and education was seen as a way of making the process of learning more practical and relevant for the tribes. This is an area of agreement between the study findings and other scholarly works since it emphasises the importance of competency-based learning in education. Nonetheless, the implementation of these policies will require proper monitoring and sufficient provision of resources.

Generally speaking, the results of the study are fairly congruent with previous studies because it is evident that many socio-economic and cultural factors affect education among the tribes (Manna & Ghosh, 2025). Previous studies have concentrated mainly on challenges, but in contrast, the current study goes further by highlighting some of the opportunities that exist due to recent policy reforms. Hence, it can be concluded that although much progress has been made due to increased access, the problem of quality and equity is still a problem in secondary education.

To sum up, this would mean that a concerted effort is needed to address the educational needs of the tribal population. While there is a need to work towards infrastructure development and implementation of policies, there is also a need to engage in socioeconomic uplift, cultural integration, and teacher development. It is through such efforts that the objectives of NEP 2020 can be achieved.

CONCLUSION

The current study looked at the problems faced by students from tribal groups concerning secondary education in India with regard to National Education Policy 2020 through a qualitative methodology. The results obtained in this study allowed understanding the reality of students', teachers', parents' and community representatives' experiences related to education access and learning in Indian tribal communities.

According to the results of the study, even though considerable improvements were recorded in terms of access to education among students from tribal communities, including increased enrolment numbers, many problems remain unresolved. Specifically, geographical isolation and absence of transportation mean that physical access to education remains a problem for some students from tribal groups. Even when educational opportunities increase due to policy measures, participation is still an important issue.

Additionally, the research concluded that the standard of education at the tribal secondary school level was impacted by many institutional variables such as the lack of trained teachers, inadequate knowledge of the subjects being taught, and insufficient application of innovative instructional techniques. The communication barrier between the local language and the language used for teaching creates more difficulties in understanding the content, which contributes to poor academic performance.

Socioeconomic status proved to be one of the important determinants of the education process for the students. It was discovered that the poverty status of their parents, illiteracy levels, and other domestic chores hampered their concentration on studies. In addition, cultural factors were significant to influence the learning process of the students.

The institutional level revealed that the basic infrastructure such as classrooms and water facilities was present but there was lack of advanced infrastructure such as libraries, playfields, and ICT in schools. Moreover, there were some obstacles for teachers who had problems with their workload and training. Such obstacles hindered the proper execution of educational policies and practices.

However, despite these issues, there appeared to be some opportunities in regard to the policy for secondary education in the form of the NEP 2020. Emphasis on inclusive education, flexibility in the curriculum, and

vocational training seemed like an appropriate means to enhance the quality of secondary education in tribal students.

In conclusion, the study found that tribal children's secondary education is influenced by several socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors. Although the country has a great framework like NEP 2020 that can be applied in addressing the challenges that are related to these aspects, the policy will only be effective on the basis of appropriate implementation, better infrastructure, training of teachers and community awareness programs. Thus, there is a need to take a holistic approach that will enable tribal children to not only have access to education, but also have quality learning experiences.

This means that the study emphasises the need to embrace intervention measures to enable fair and inclusive secondary education for tribal groups.

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