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INDEX

Sr. No.	Paper No.	Paper Title	Authors Name	Page No.
1	W01	AI in Teaching, Learning and Research	Dr. Alpesh R. Prajapati	01-05
2	W02 & W03	From Policy to Practice: A Multidimensional Analysis of Implementation Challenges in India's National Education Policy 2020	Dr. Deepa C. Chandwani Dr. Pragnesh B. Dalwadi	06-11
3	W04	Role of NEP-2020 in Transforming Higher Education in India	Dr. Hardik Mehta	12-16
4	W06	NEP 2020: A Transformative Stage Toward Equity and Inclusion in Education	Dr. Manish M. Chudasama	17-22
5	W07 & W16	NEP 2020 and Its Implementation: Examining Challenges in the Indian Education Sector	Dr. Gargi P Patel Dr. Nirali Ketan Shah	23-28
6	W09	National Education Policy to Transform the Education System of 21st Century: Prospects and its Implementation	Dr. Shilpa Jayantilal Patel	29-34
7	W11	Assessing NEP-2020 Implementation in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Faculty and Student Perspectives	Dr. Vrundani K. Patel	35-43
8	W14	Reimagining Education: A Sociological Analysis of NEP 2020's Challenges and Future Outcomes	Mr. Jitendra Dhebariya	44-50
9	W20	Bridging The Digital Divide in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges of Technology Integration under National Education Policy 2020	Dr. Avani Lalitkumar Saraiya	51-58
10	W24	Digital Education under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Challenges and Opportunities for Indian Higher Education	Dr. Jigarkumar Joshi	59-64
11	W25& W26	Digital Education and Technology Integration under NEP 2020	Dr. Ketan J Mehta Dr. Ravjibhai Kotval	65-69
12	W27	Teacher Capacity Building: Evaluating the Effectiveness of AI-Powered NotebookLM in Classroom Pedagogy	Dr. Krishna M. Lakhani	70-74
13	W28	Digital Education and Technology Integration in Higher Education: Students' Perspectives in the Context of NEP 2020	Dr. Rohan Shah	75-81
14	W29	Digital India and Educational Transformation: A Comprehensive Statistical Analysis using Multiple Regression Approach	Dr. Sanjay G Raval	82-87
15	W30& W31	Transforming India's Workforce: A Critical Study of Skill Development Initiatives under the NEP 2020	Dr. Vishal Gupta Dr. Ghanshyambhai M. Anjara	88-94

16	W32	Implementation of National Education Policy 2020 in Higher Education: Opportunities and Constraints	Mr. Bhaveshkumar R. Rathod	95-100
17	W35& P72	Digital Accounting Practices in MSMEs: An Empirical Study of Awareness and Usage Behaviour	Ms. Shivangi N. Patel Dr. Amina Nakhuda	101-104
18	W37	Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Higher Education: Revitalizing Cultural Roots and Enhancing Learning Outcomes	Dr. Ajitha Shambhu Nair	105-111
19	W40	Indian Knowledge System in New Education Policy	Dr. Rupalben Ashokkumar	112-115
20	W41& W42	Towards Holistic Learning: The Vision of NEP 2020 (An Empirical Analytical Study Based on Primary Data)	Dr. Shital Rathod Dr. Kandarp Chavda	116-120
21	W43	Integrating Ayurveda into Leadership: A Dosha-Centred Approach	Dr. Megha Bhatt	121-128
22	W44	Educating the Inner Self for a Young Nation: Leveraging the Bhagavad Gita and Indian Philosophy to Realize India's Demographic Dividend	Dr. Shweta Zala	129-135
23	W45 & P26	Physical Activity and Sports as Pedagogical Tools in School Education: A Critical Analysis of NEP 2020	Dr. Mukeshkumar B. Baraiya Dr. Yogendra J. Chauhan	136-141
24	W48	Comparative Evaluation of Traditional and Modern Teaching Approaches in Secondary Schools of Ahmedabad City	Dr. Navita Sharma	142-147
25	W49	Portuguese Colonial Legacy and Its Impact on Tourism Development in Diu	Mr. Hardik R. Rathod	148-152
26	W52	English as a Bridge to Higher Education: Women's Academic Inclusion in Post-NEP 2020 India — A Qualitative Secondary-Data Review	Dr. Payal Trivedi	153-156
27	W56& W57	Inclusivity under NEP 2020: A Critical Study of Adivasi (Bhil) Representation in Higher Education	Ms. Saba Syed Dr. Sagar Vyas	157-160
28	W58& W59 P71	Comparative Risk–Return Evaluation of Selected Investment Instruments in the Indian Financial Market	Dr. Khagesh Joshi Ms. Lekshmi Ezhava Dr. Vaibhav Gallani	161-169
29	W60 & 61	Performance Evaluation of Selected Public Sector Banks in India.	Ms. Heenaben Parmar Dr. Ronak Rana	170-177
30	W23	Technology-Driven Higher Education: Insights from Students and Educators	Dr. Janki Mahesh Kotecha	178-181
31	W33	Need And Issues of Digital Education	Mr. Hasmukh Ramanlal Panchal	182-188

W56&57: Inclusivity under NEP 2020: A Critical Study of Adivasi (Bhil) Representation in Higher Education

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Abstract: To redress historical injustices experienced by marginalised people, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions an inclusive and equitable educational system. In the context of higher education, this study critically evaluates the policy's approach to inclusivity with particular reference to Adivasi communities, especially the Bhil tribe. The study emphasises the structural, linguistic, cultural, and epistemological obstacles that continue to prevent Bhil students from meaningfully participating in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), drawing on critical theoretical perspectives. Although NEP 2020 incorporates progressive policies, including flexible learning pathways, bilingual education, and the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, its implementation is nonetheless uneven and often aspirational. The paper reasons that true inclusivity requires a shift from access-based frameworks to transformative approaches that ensure recognition, representation, and epistemic justice. To make higher education more sensitive to the needs and knowledge systems of Adivasi communities, it concludes by suggesting transformational solutions.

Keywords: Adivasi Education, Bhil Tribe, NEP 2020, Higher Education, Inclusivity, Epistemic Justice, Tribal Representation.

Introduction

Education has long been recognised as a powerful tool for social transformation and equity. In a diverse and stratified country like India, it plays a crucial role in addressing historical injustices faced by marginalised communities such as Adivasis. Despite constitutional safeguards, the Bhil tribe—one of the largest indigenous groups—remains underrepresented in higher education due to persistent socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift in India's educational landscape by emphasising inclusivity, flexibility, and cultural relevance. It introduces provisions aimed at reducing disparities, particularly for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). However, the effectiveness of these provisions in ensuring meaningful inclusion within Higher Education Institutions remains debatable. This paper critically evaluates NEP 2020's inclusivity framework with special reference to the Bhil community. It explores structural inequalities, policy limitations, and the need for transformative approaches in higher education.

Research Objectives

- To examine the representation of Bhil (Adivasi) students in higher education under NEP 2020.
- To analyse structural, linguistic, and cultural barriers affecting their participation.
- To evaluate the inclusivity framework of NEP 2020.
- To suggest transformative strategies for equitable higher education.

This study is qualitative and analytical in nature. It is based on policy analysis of NEP 2020, review of existing literature on tribal education, and critical theoretical perspectives such as Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Freire's critique of the banking model of education. Secondary data from government reports and academic sources has been used to support arguments.

Understanding the Bhil Context in Higher Education

The Bhil tribe, one of the largest Adivasi groups in India, is primarily located in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Despite constitutional safeguards, Bhil communities remain underrepresented in higher education due to persistent structural inequalities. Historically, tribal education has followed an assimilationist model that overlooks indigenous knowledge systems, creating a disconnect between institutional learning and Bhil lived experiences rooted in oral and community-based traditions.

The participation of Scheduled Tribes in higher education remains below the national average, largely due to poverty, limited access to quality schooling, and inadequate infrastructure in tribal regions. These challenges contribute to low enrolment and high dropout rates. Cultural alienation further intensifies exclusion, as dominant institutional norms marginalise Bhil identities and perspectives within academic spaces.

NEP 2020: Vision of Inclusivity

The National Education Policy 2020 redefines inclusion by emphasising equity, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity. It introduces the concept of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), recognising the need for targeted support for marginalized communities (Government of India 9).

A key feature of NEP 2020 is flexible and multidisciplinary education, including multiple entry-exit options and the Academic Bank of Credits, aimed at reducing dropout rates and supporting diverse learning pathways—particularly relevant for Bhil students facing educational disruptions.

The policy also promotes multilingual education to reduce linguistic barriers by encouraging instruction in the mother tongue or local language. However, such practices remain limited in higher education. Additionally, NEP 2020 advocates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, including tribal knowledge, to promote epistemic inclusivity.

It further proposes measures such as community participation, financial support, and Special Education Zones to enhance access.

Challenges in Implementation: A Critical Perspective and Towards Transformative Solutions

- The implementation of NEP 2020 continues to face significant challenges, particularly in relation to the Bhil community, due to deeply embedded structural inequalities. Higher education institutions often privilege dominant forms of cultural capital, thereby marginalising Bhil students whose knowledge systems are rooted in oral traditions and community-based practices. Data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (2020–21) indicates that Scheduled Tribes account for only 5.8% of total enrolment despite constituting 8.6% of the population, highlighting persistent exclusion within academic spaces.

- Pedagogical practices further reinforce this marginalisation. The continued dominance of lecture-based and exam-oriented approaches, criticised by Freire as the “banking model” of education, limits opportunities for participatory and experiential learning. This disconnect disproportionately affects Bhil students and contributes to higher dropout rates, particularly during the initial stages of higher education.
- Although NEP 2020 advocates the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, their implementation often remains superficial. Bhil knowledge traditions are frequently reduced to cultural artefacts rather than recognised as legitimate epistemologies. As noted by Virginius Xaxa, such inclusion tends to be symbolic rather than transformative, failing to challenge dominant academic frameworks.
- Linguistic barriers also continue to impede meaningful participation. Bhil students, who primarily speak Bhili or related dialects, encounter difficulties in institutions dominated by English and standard Hindi. Ajit K. Mohanty conceptualises this as “subtractive bilingualism,” wherein learners lose their linguistic identity without attaining full academic proficiency, thereby affecting both performance and engagement.
- The digital divide further exacerbates these challenges. According to the National Sample Survey Office, only 15–20% of rural tribal households have access to the internet, significantly limiting Bhil students’ ability to participate in online and blended learning environments. Additionally, institutional cultures often lack adequate representation and cultural sensitivity, resulting in feelings of alienation and marginalisation among Adivasi students.
- Finally, the gap between policy and practice remains a critical concern. Despite NEP 2020’s inclusive vision, its implementation is hindered by limited funding and inadequate teacher training, particularly in tribal regions. These constraints restrict the development of culturally responsive pedagogies and support systems, thereby undermining the policy’s transformative potential.

The following suggestions can be considered for inclusive and transformative higher education.

- Recognise Bhil cultural capital by adopting inclusive evaluation methods and establishing Tribal Resource Centres.
- Replace lecture-based pedagogy with participatory and experiential learning, including storytelling and community engagement.
- Integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems meaningfully into curricula and promote Bhil-led research and community participation.
- Reduce linguistic barriers through bilingual teaching and language bridge programmes.
- Bridge the digital divide by improving infrastructure, providing devices, and promoting digital literacy.
- Enhance representation by recruiting Adivasi faculty and fostering culturally inclusive institutional environments.
- Strengthen implementation through increased funding, teacher training, and effective monitoring mechanisms.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Bhil students—ranging from linguistic barriers and cultural alienation to economic constraints and epistemic marginalisation—demonstrate that inclusion in higher education must go beyond access to address issues of power, representation, and recognition. While NEP 2020 provides a progressive framework, its transformative potential depends on effective implementation and structural reform. Meaningful inclusivity requires reimagining institutional practices, validating indigenous knowledge systems, and ensuring active participation of Adivasi communities. Only then can higher education become a truly equitable and empowering space for marginalised groups like the Bhils.

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About SLU College

Shree Lalshankar Umiyashankar Arts and Harivadan & Padmaben Thakore Commerce College for Women, which was established in 1920 as an endeavour of Gujarat Stree Kelvani Mandal, has the proud privilege of being the first women's college in Ahmedabad. The college is recognised under Section 2 (f) and 12 (b) of UGC Act 17th June, 1972. The college runs various programmes in affiliation with Gujarat University such as - B.A., B.Com., and M.Com. The BS-BBA programme was added from the academic year 2025-2026. The college also runs several add-on programmes like Fashion Design and Computer Courses at the ICTC centre located at the SLU Campus.

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