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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE VISION OF VIKSIT BHARAT FROM GENDER LENS

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Abstract

Inclusive education stands at the core of India’s vision for *Viksit Bharat 2047*, which envisions a developed, equitable, and knowledge-driven nation. This review paper critically examines the concept of inclusive education in India through a gender lens, exploring how educational policies and programs contribute to achieving gender equality and social justice. Drawing on existing literature, government policies, and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the paper highlights the interconnection between inclusive education, empowerment of women, and national development. It reviews key initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, and the Gender Inclusion Fund, assessing their effectiveness in promoting access, equity, and participation among girls and marginalized communities. Despite remarkable progress, gender disparities persist due to socio-cultural barriers, economic inequalities, and digital divides. The paper concludes that realizing the goals of *Viksit Bharat* requires a sustained commitment to gender-sensitive educational reforms, teacher training, community participation, and inclusive digital access. Strengthening inclusive education from a gender perspective is essential not only for achieving educational equality but also for shaping an inclusive, innovative, and empowered India by 2047.

Key Words: Education, Empowerment, Gender, Inclusive, Marginalised

Introduction

India has set an ambitious target with its *Vision of Viksit Bharat by 2047*—a vision that entails a developed, equitable, and inclusive society where economic progress, social justice, and educational excellence go hand in hand. Central to this vision is quality education for all, especially for those who have historically been marginalized. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly recognizes equitable and inclusive education as a foundational pillar for achieving the goals of Viksit Bharat. (Department of School Education)

Inclusive education, in this context, refers to an education system that ensures all learners—regardless of gender, socio-economic status, disability, geographical location, caste, or other identity markers—have equitable access to learning opportunities, can participate fully, and are supported to succeed. NEP 2020’s emphasis on *Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups* (SEDGs) explicitly includes female and transgender individuals, among others, and seeks to embed gender inclusion throughout policy measures. (Education Ministry of India)

Applying a gender lens to inclusive education means recognizing how gender—along with intersecting identities such as caste, disability, and class—shapes access, participation, and outcomes in education. In India, gender disparities continue to persist: though girl enrollment in primary education has narrowed, significant gaps remain at higher levels of schooling; more so in marginalized regions; and compounded by socio-cultural norms that constrain girls’ participation. Moreover, policies often address gender inclusion in rhetoric but face implementation challenges in infrastructure, teacher training, safety, and social attitudes. These gaps matter deeply: education for girls empowers them individually, has multiplier effects on health, economic participation and prosperity, and is central to realizing India’s full potential. (See Datta, Khanna, & Mishra, 2024; Ministry of Education, Government of India) (IJIP)

NEP 2020 outlines several mechanisms to promote gender inclusive and equitable education. For example, it provides for the establishment of a Gender Inclusion Fund aimed specifically at supporting girls and transgender students, integrating gender as a cross-cutting priority in planning and implementation. (Education Ministry of India) It also aims to ensure that the school curriculum, teacher capacity, learning environments, and infrastructure are responsive to diverse learner needs, including safe spaces and support mechanisms. (archives.publishing.org.in)



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However, while these policy provisions are promising, translating them into visible outcomes remains challenging. Issues such as unequal access to digital resources, early drop-outs among girls, safety concerns, gendered stereotypes in teaching, and lack of attention to non-binary or transgender identities together hinder progress. Additionally, intersectional factors—such as caste, class, disability, and rural-urban divide—exacerbate gender inequities. These challenges suggest that meeting the vision of *Viksit Bharat* will require more than strong policy design; it will demand sustained political will, adequate resource allocation, community engagement, monitoring, and culturally sensitive implementation.

This paper reviews and synthesizes the existing literature and policy documents to understand how inclusive education is envisioned under *Viksit Bharat* from a gender perspective. It seeks to (a) examine key policy initiatives and their intended gender equity measures; (b) analyze the extent of implementation and challenges; (c) highlight gaps in literature; and (d) propose recommendations for strengthening gender inclusive education toward realizing *Viksit Bharat*. In doing so, it aims to contribute to both academic debates and policy discussions around making inclusive education a lived reality for all genders in India.

Literature Review

Research on inclusive education in India through a gender lens highlights persistent disparities in access, curriculum, and institutional practices despite several policy interventions. Upadhyay (2024) revealed that gender inequality in education is deeply intertwined with regional and economic factors, as women from rural and low-income regions continue to face limited access and higher rates of educational unemployment. Das and Singhal (2021) similarly found a persistent gender gap in mathematics achievement among rural students, reflecting the combined influence of household income, social norms, and regional variations. Studies analysing school textbooks, such as Nandi, Halder, and Das (2025) and the *Manifestation of Women's Rights in School Textbooks* study (2024), show that gender stereotypes remain prevalent in curricular materials, with women frequently portrayed in traditional caregiving roles, thereby reinforcing biased perceptions from an early age. Mittal and Goel (2024) examined the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* and found that while it recognizes transgender students under socio-economically disadvantaged groups, there is still ambiguity in policy implementation and institutional readiness. Bhutia (2024) noted that even in higher education, female students—especially from marginalised and rural backgrounds—face both overt and subtle exclusion in academic participation and subject selection. Furthermore, Singh and Singh (2023) demonstrated that socioeconomic status strongly predicts female participation in STEM fields, where representation remains disproportionately low. Complementing these findings, Datta, Khanna, and Mishra (2024) argued that policy reforms alone are insufficient without transforming community attitudes and teacher mindsets toward gender inclusivity. Collectively, these studies suggest that while India's policy landscape under NEP 2020 and the vision of *Viksit Bharat* has advanced towards inclusivity, significant challenges persist in translating policies into classroom practice, ensuring intersectional inclusion, and achieving equitable learning outcomes across gender and region.

Conceptual framework

Inclusive education is not merely a policy initiative but a philosophical and moral commitment to social justice, equity, and human development. The conceptual foundation of inclusive education in India draws from international frameworks such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), the Education for All (EFA) Declaration (2000), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—especially SDG 4, which calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education for all,” and SDG 5, which emphasizes gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (UNESCO, 2015). These global frameworks have shaped India's educational vision, reflected in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which integrates inclusion and gender equity as central pillars in achieving the *Viksit Bharat 2047* agenda.

The NEP 2020 defines inclusive education as the process of ensuring equitable access, participation, and learning outcomes for all learners, particularly those belonging to marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy recognizes that inclusion goes beyond providing physical access; it also requires addressing systemic barriers—such as poverty, gender discrimination, and cultural bias—that prevent learners from



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thriving. The Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) proposed under NEP 2020 is a structural mechanism to reduce gender disparities by providing targeted support to female and transgender students, developing gender-sensitive learning materials, and promoting safe learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2021).

From a gender lens, inclusive education involves understanding how gender intersects with other social identities—such as caste, class, religion, and disability—to create layered disadvantages. Feminist educational theory emphasizes that education should not merely aim at parity in numbers but also transform the structural and cultural conditions that reproduce inequality (Stromquist, 2013). In this perspective, gender inclusion is not limited to access and enrollment; it extends to representation in curricula, teacher attitudes, leadership roles, and the broader socio-political environment in which learning occurs. As Nussbaum (2011) explains in her Capability Approach, genuine inclusion means expanding individuals' real freedoms to lead the kind of lives they value. Therefore, achieving gender-equitable education requires expanding girls' and women's capabilities—such as bodily integrity, decision-making power, and the ability to participate meaningfully in social and economic life.

Within the *Viksit Bharat* framework, inclusive education is viewed as both an outcome and a driver of national development. An inclusive and gender-sensitive education system helps harness the full potential of the population, fostering innovation, productivity, and social cohesion. It aligns with Amartya Sen's (1999) notion that development is "a process of expanding real freedoms," implying that educational access and equity are not merely social goods but essential conditions for economic growth and human empowerment. The vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* thus connects inclusive education to the broader developmental goal of creating an India where every citizen—regardless of gender or background—can contribute to and benefit from progress.

This conceptual framework therefore rests on three interlinked pillars: equity, empowerment, and participation. Equity ensures fairness in opportunities and resources; empowerment ensures that learners, particularly girls, gain agency and voice; and participation ensures that all groups are actively included in shaping educational systems and policies. Together, these principles guide India's pursuit of inclusive education from a gender perspective, forming the conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows in this review paper.

Inclusive Education in India's Policy Context

India's policy framework for education has progressively shifted toward a holistic vision of inclusive education—one that not only ensures universal access, but also equity, participation, and quality for all, especially for gender-marginalised groups. Under the banner of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, recent governmental policies and programmes have sought to reduce gender disparities through targeted measures, while also embedding inclusion as a cross-cutting priority. This section reviews the major policy instruments, provisions, their strengths, and current limitations from a gender lens.

Key Policies and Programmes

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The NEP 2020 is perhaps the most significant recent policy in India's education sector. It explicitly emphasises *Equitable and Inclusive Education*, with Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) standing central in its planning framework. SEDGs include female and transgender individuals, among other communities facing social, economic, geographical, or cultural marginalisation. The policy mandates that gender be addressed as a cross-cutting priority in education planning, implementation, and monitoring. (Department of School Education)

A pivotal measure in NEP 2020 is the creation of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF), intended especially to provide equitable quality education for girls and transgender students. The GIF aims to support measures like improving infrastructure (e.g., safe toilets, gender-friendly amenities), teacher training for gender sensitivity, leadership development for women staff, and outreach programs to enrol and retain girls. (Education Ministry of India)



NEP also introduces *Special Education Zones* in disadvantaged or hard-to-reach regions to ensure access and equity. These zones are meant to address both infrastructural and systemic constraints that disproportionately affect girls and those from underprivileged backgrounds. Curriculum reform, flexible subject streams, and pedagogical changes are also proposed to make learning more inclusive and reduce dropout rates among girls and other SEDGs. (News18)

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan

Another major programme is Samagra Shiksha, which consolidates several earlier schemes (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, RMSA, etc.) into a single integrated scheme covering pre-school to senior secondary education. Under this scheme, inclusive education is a core component. For example, it includes efforts to bridge gender and social gaps, ensure equitable access across rural/urban divides, provide services for Children with Special Needs (CwSN), and promote gender-sensitive pedagogical and infrastructural support. (samagrashikshajk.nic.in)

Samagra Shiksha's manifest interventions include:

- Identification, assessment, and support (aids, appliances, assistive technology) for CwSN;
- Stipends for girls with special needs;
- Training of general and special educators in inclusive pedagogy;
- Curriculum and learning materials adapted to be more gender and disability inclusive;
- Ensuring accessible infrastructure (ramps, accessible toilets, etc.) in schools. (Samagra Education)

Strengths of the Policy Context from a Gender Lens

1. Explicit Recognition of Gender Issues

The NEP 2020's inclusion of female and transgender students within SEDGs ensures gender is not an afterthought but is embedded in the policy framework. This is a definite advance over earlier policies that addressed gender more implicitly. (Department of School Education)

2. Mechanisms for Targeted Support

GIF and Special Education Zones are tools aimed at directing resources specifically to those who need them most. For girls and gender-diverse students in remote or marginalised areas, this could translate into greater access, safer learning environments, and better retention. (News18)

3. Addressing Intersectionality

Many policies under NEP and Samagra Shiksha consider more than just gender: socio-economic disadvantage, disability, geographical remoteness, caste/tribal identity are also recognized. Thus, the approach moves toward an intersectional understanding of barriers to education. (Education Ministry of India)

4. Holistic Vision for School System Reform

The combination of infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum reform, leadership, and financial incentives shows that inclusive education is being approached from multiple angles rather than just as a matter of access. This multi-pronged strategy is important for meaningful gender inclusion. (DD News)



Challenges, Gaps & Limitations

Despite these strengths, implementation gaps and systemic barriers remain, which could prevent India from fully realizing a gender-inclusive education system under *Viksit Bharat*.

1. Implementation and Monitoring

Setting up funds like the GIF or zones is one thing; ensuring that they are adequately funded, properly managed, and equitably disbursed is another. Past schemes suffer from delays, insufficient budgets, or misallocation. Also, monitoring of outcomes (especially at secondary and higher levels of education) remains weak.

2. Persistent Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes

Even with policy support, deeply entrenched cultural practices (e.g. early marriage, household responsibilities, gender bias in valuing girls' education) continue to impact girls' enrollment, attendance, and completion. Policies must engage with communities and societal attitudes; this is often underemphasised or under-resourced.

3. Geographical, Economic & Intersectional Inequalities

Girls from tribal, remote, or marginalized rural areas face additional barriers (poor transport, lack of nearby schools, inadequate facilities). Economic constraints (poverty, opportunity costs) are still significant. Intersectional identities (e.g. girl + disability + low caste) compound exclusion. While SEDGs label captures some of this, the on-ground reach is uneven.

4. Gender Identity & Non-Binary Inclusion

While transgender individuals are included under SEDGs, policy language and implementation often continue to treat gender in binary frames. Non-binary, intersex and LGBTQIA+ identities often remain partially invisible in curricular content, teacher training, or school climate policies. (TheQuint)

5. Resource Constraints and Infrastructure

Safe school facilities (e.g. hygienic toilets, separate and secure sanitation especially for girls), transport, digital access (devices, connectivity), and sufficient qualified female teachers remain challenges in many parts of India. Without these, other policy provisions may have limited effect.

6. Retention and Transition

Dropouts among girls tend to increase at higher grades (secondary, senior secondary). Transition to higher education is also hindered by economic, social and logistic hurdles. Ensuring retention and smooth transition is key but less consistently addressed.

6. Challenges and Gaps

While India has made significant strides in policy design for inclusive and gender-sensitive education, persistent challenges and gaps threaten to undermine the realization of these ideals under *Viksit Bharat 2047*. These obstacles span



socio-economic, infrastructural, cultural, political, and implementation domains. This section reviews the major challenges, supported by recent evidence.

6.1 Socio-Economic Barriers

Poverty, Opportunity Costs, and Domestic Responsibilities

Economic constraints remain a fundamental barrier to girls' access and retention in school. Even when tuition is free or subsidised, families often incur costs for uniforms, books, transportation, and sometimes private tutoring. Families facing financial hardship may prioritize boys' education over girls', expecting girls to contribute to household chores or work. Plays out especially in rural and remote areas. (Aapke Saath Foundation)

Distance, Transport, and Access

In many parts of India, especially in rural or tribal regions, schools are located far away. The absence of safe and reliable transport discourages attendance, particularly for girls after primary levels. In Karnataka, for instance, girls in remote districts drop out when the school is too far, with families citing both cost and safety when sending girls on long routes. (The New Indian Express)

6.2 Infrastructural and Facilities-Related Gaps

Sanitation, Toilets, and Safety Amenities

One of the most recurrent concerns is lack of gender-friendly infrastructure. Even though recent UDISE+ reports show improvements (e.g. 97.3% schools having girls' toilets), maintenance, privacy, safety, and hygiene remain issues. Poor toilets and sanitation facilities particularly in secondary schools often lead to absenteeism among girls, especially during menstruation. (The Indian Express)

School Infrastructure and Teaching Resources

Many schools, especially in disadvantaged regions, still lack proper lighting, boundary walls, safe drinking water, separate clean classrooms, and other basic facilities—which undermine safety and acceptability for girls. Also, lack of gender-sensitive lab resources, laboratories, libraries, and technological resources amplify learning inequality. (Aapke Saath Foundation)

6.3 Cultural, Social Norms, and Gender Bias

Early Marriage, Gender Roles, and Household Work

Cultural norms continue to play a strong part in shaping education outcomes. In many communities, girls are expected to shoulder domestic responsibilities, care for younger siblings or relatives, or be married off early—factors that lead to dropout or discourage continuous participation. These norms are stronger where patriarchal attitudes are deeply entrenched. (The New Indian Express)

Stereotypes in Curriculum and Teacher Attitudes

Gender biases persist in curricula, textbooks, and teacher behaviour. Stereotyped portrayals of gender roles, lack of female role models, male-dominated subject streams (especially in STEM), and teacher practices that favour male participation in classroom interaction all affect girls' aspirations and sense of belonging. (Aapke Saath Foundation)



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Discussion: Way Forward for Viksit Bharat

Achieving the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* requires India to move beyond policy formulation toward effective implementation of inclusive and gender-responsive education at every level. As the NEP 2020 emphasizes, inclusion must become the “core guiding principle” of the educational ecosystem, not an add-on (Ministry of Education, 2020). This involves transforming classroom practices, teacher education, assessment systems, and school environments to ensure that every learner—irrespective of gender, social background, or ability—can participate fully and meaningfully in learning. The way forward should focus on three interrelated dimensions: **policy execution**, **pedagogical reform**, and **societal transformation**.

First, **policy execution** must be strengthened through accountability and monitoring mechanisms. The Gender Inclusion Fund and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan need robust data-driven evaluation to identify regional disparities and track progress across gender and socioeconomic groups (UNESCO, 2023). Partnerships between central and state governments should prioritize gender budgeting in education, ensuring that resource allocation benefits girls, women, and gender-diverse learners equitably.

Second, **pedagogical reform** is essential for creating gender-sensitive classrooms. Teacher training programs should integrate gender awareness and inclusive pedagogies, moving away from rote learning toward participatory and reflective approaches. Studies show that teachers’ unconscious biases often shape students’ self-perception and academic motivation, particularly among girls in STEM subjects (Singh & Singh, 2023). Therefore, reorienting teacher preparation and continuous professional development is critical to fostering gender equity in learning outcomes.

Third, **societal transformation** must accompany educational reform. Inclusion cannot succeed without challenging deep-rooted social norms and gender stereotypes that limit women’s and girls’ aspirations. Community engagement, awareness campaigns, and role models can help build social support for girls’ education and for non-traditional career choices. The digital divide must also be addressed, ensuring affordable internet access, digital literacy, and gender-sensitive e-learning content, particularly in rural and underserved regions (World Bank, 2023).

Conclusion

Inclusive education is not only a cornerstone of India’s educational reform but also a moral and developmental imperative for realizing the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*. This review paper highlighted that while significant progress has been made through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and initiatives such as the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and Gender Inclusion Fund, persistent gender disparities continue to hinder equitable educational outcomes. True inclusion extends beyond physical access—it demands the transformation of learning environments, curricula, teacher attitudes, and community mindsets. As Sen (1999) argues, development is about expanding freedoms; education thus becomes both the means and the end of empowerment.

Moving forward, achieving *Viksit Bharat* requires sustained political will, gender-sensitive policy implementation, and investment in teacher capacity and digital inclusion. Ensuring that girls and gender-diverse learners have equal opportunities to learn, lead, and innovate is essential for building a just and prosperous society. When education systems embrace inclusion as a lived reality rather than a theoretical goal, India will be closer to realizing the transformative promise of *Viksit Bharat 2047*—a nation where equality in education leads to equality in opportunity and development for all.

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