



Education as a Unifying Force: Empowering Youth for Inclusive and Sustainable Nation-Building in India

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Abstract

Secondary education represents a pivotal stage in India's educational trajectory, serving as a transformative platform for youth empowerment and nation-building. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study analyzes UDISE+, ASER, and UNESCO data alongside policy documents to examine how secondary schooling advances social inclusion, equity, and sustainability (Ministry of Education, 2025; UNESCO, 2023). Secondary education fosters national integration by bringing together students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds (Government of India [GoI], 2020). Although reforms aligned with the National Education Policy 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize universal access and equity (United Nations, 2015), disparities persist. Nearly one-fifth of adolescents remain out of school (Ministry of Education, 2025); girls face higher dropout rates (Smile Foundation, 2025); and rural areas experience gaps in digital infrastructure (Mehta, 2025). Strengthening inclusive policies, digital access, vocational integration, and sustainability-oriented curricula is essential for empowering youth and advancing equitable nation-building.

Keywords: Secondary Education; Youth Empowerment; Inclusive Education; Sustainable Development; National Education Policy 2020; Social Equity; Digital Divide.

Introduction

Education has long been recognized as a foundational pillar of nation-building, particularly in diverse societies such as India. In a country characterized by cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic plurality, secondary education serves as a unifying platform that fosters shared values, social cohesion, and national identity. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes that education is fundamental to achieving equity, social justice, and national development (Government of India, 2020). Likewise, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan was



introduced to universalize secondary education and reduce gender, socio-economic, and disability-related disparities (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Given India's expanding youth population, strengthening secondary education (Grades 9–12) is critical for developing critical thinking, vocational competence, and civic responsibility. Such reforms align with the Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, and 10 on inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as SDG 10 (United Nations, 2015).

The above research questions are interrelated and collectively guide the study in examining how secondary education in India can function as a catalyst for inclusion, equity, and sustainable nation-building within the framework of the National Education Policy 2020 and the broader vision of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does secondary education in India promote inclusion and equity in terms of access, retention, gender parity, digital access, and participation of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups?
2. How effectively do current policy frameworks, particularly the National Education Policy 2020, align secondary education with the goals of inclusive and sustainable development, including United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4?
3. What structural and pedagogical reforms are necessary to strengthen secondary education as a unifying and empowering force for youth and sustainable nation-building in India?

Literature Review

Education and Social Cohesion

International scholarship consistently highlights education as a central mechanism for promoting social cohesion and democratic citizenship. Global policy frameworks, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4, emphasize “inclusive and equitable quality education” as essential for fostering tolerance, social mobility, and lifelong learning (United Nations, 2015). Reports by UNESCO underscore that schooling cultivates critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and shared civic values, thereby strengthening social unity in plural societies (UNESCO, 2023). In the Indian context, education has historically been linked with constitutional commitments to national integration and cultural preservation. The National



Education Policy 2020 reiterates this vision by positioning education as a driver of equity, scientific advancement, and social justice (Government of India, 2020). Scholars argue that common schooling experiences can reduce ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions, fostering a shared national identity within India's diverse social fabric.

Inclusion, Equity, and National Policies

The literature further emphasizes that social cohesion through education is contingent upon inclusion and equity. Although earlier reforms, such as the National Policy on Education 1986, expanded elementary access, secondary education remained unevenly distributed across regions and communities. The Right to Education Act 2009 institutionalized free and compulsory education up to age 14, while programs such as the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan aimed to universalize secondary schooling and remove gender and socio-economic barriers (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Despite these efforts, disparities persist. Secondary Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) remains below universal levels, and dropout rates are disproportionately high among girls, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and rural youth. Structural factors—including poverty, distance to schools, safety concerns, and limited infrastructure—continue to constrain equitable participation.

Education for Sustainability and Curriculum Reform

Recent research increasingly connects secondary education with sustainability and global citizenship. UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development framework advocates integrating environmental literacy and ethical responsibility into curricula (UNESCO, 2023). Aligning national reforms with SDGs 4, 5, and 13 enables education systems to cultivate environmentally conscious and socially responsible youth. NEP 2020 promotes multidisciplinary learning and vocational integration, seeking to enhance employability and reduce dropout rates. However, implementation challenges—particularly inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher preparedness, and prevailing academic biases—restrict the transformative potential of curriculum reform.

Overall, the literature converges on the view that secondary education can serve as a powerful instrument of unity and sustainable development, provided that equity, quality, and contextual relevance are systematically addressed.



Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative data analysis with qualitative inquiry to examine the role of secondary education in promoting inclusive and sustainable nation-building in India. The combination of statistical trends and policy interpretation enables a comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis.

The quantitative component draws on nationally representative datasets to assess patterns of access, equity, and infrastructure. Data were obtained from the UDISE+ (2021–2025) to examine enrollment ratios, gender parity indices, school infrastructure, and digital access. Learning outcomes were reviewed using findings from the Annual Status of Education Report (2024). Additional indicators on Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), dropout rates, and equity dimensions were referenced from UNESCO and national statistical sources, including NSSO data on household internet access. These datasets enabled analysis of disparities across rural–urban locations, gender, and socio-economic categories.

The qualitative component involved content analysis of major policy documents, including the National Education Policy 2020, the Right to Education Act 2009, and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan framework. International policy references, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4, were also examined to situate national reforms within global commitments. Published academic studies, NGO reports, and documented case examples—such as rural digital classroom initiatives—were reviewed to contextualize implementation realities.

Triangulation was employed to synthesize quantitative trends with qualitative insights. For example, statistical evidence of rural digital gaps was interpreted alongside policy responses and field-based reports. By integrating the breadth of national data with the depth of policy and contextual analysis, this methodology provides a holistic understanding of secondary education’s contribution to equity, cohesion, and sustainable development in India.

Analysis and Discussion

Secondary Education and Nation-Building

Secondary education in India occupies a strategic position in advancing inclusive nation-building, yet its expansion remains uneven. Recent data from UDISE+ (2024–25) indicate that the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at the secondary level (Grades 9–10) stands at



approximately 79%, falling short of the universalization target envisioned under the National Education Policy 2020, which aspires to achieve 100% GER across all school levels by 2030 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023; MoE, 2020). This implies that nearly one in five adolescents remains outside the formal secondary system. Such exclusion has long-term implications, as secondary schooling develops higher-order thinking, civic consciousness, and employability skills essential for democratic participation and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2022).

Despite these challenges, recent trends reflect incremental progress. Enrollment levels have gradually improved, and dropout rates have stabilized, though they remain a concern (MoE, 2023). Importantly, targeted inclusion measures have enhanced participation among historically marginalized communities. Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students now show enrollment ratios approaching the national average, reflecting the impact of scholarship schemes, affirmative policies, and equity-focused interventions (MoE, 2023). Such developments contribute to reducing structural disparities and strengthening social integration.

Gender parity has also improved substantially. Girls now constitute nearly 48% of total secondary enrollments, marking a significant shift from earlier decades characterized by pronounced gender gaps (MoE, 2023). However, retention remains a challenge, particularly after age fourteen, when socio-economic pressures disproportionately affect female continuation rates (ASER Centre, 2024).

Secondary schools function as microcosms of India's pluralistic society. By bringing together students from diverse linguistic, religious, and regional backgrounds, these institutions cultivate shared civic values and mutual respect, echoing the ethical and constitutional vision articulated in NEP 2020 (MoE, 2020). Residential institutions such as Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya promote socio-cultural integration through district-based representation, fostering a pan-Indian identity (Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti, 2022).

Overall, while universalization remains incomplete, secondary education in India increasingly serves as a vital instrument of inclusive nation-building.



Promoting Inclusion and Equity

Despite access improvements, gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in India's secondary education. Many girls discontinue schooling due to poverty, early marriage, and inadequate sanitation or safety facilities. UNESCO (2022) notes that a significant proportion of Indian girls leave school before completing secondary education, weakening equal participation and long-term demographic gains, as educated women tend to marry later and have healthier families. Government initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and incentives like free transport and sanitation facilities aim to address these barriers. The National Education Policy 2020 further institutionalizes support through a Gender-Inclusion Fund (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). States such as Rajasthan and Haryana have reported modest gains in girls' secondary enrollment following targeted interventions (MoE, 2023), though sustained monitoring of GER by gender remains essential.

Socioeconomic and minority disparities also limit equity. Children from low-income rural households and those with disabilities remain underrepresented. NEP 2020 emphasizes the inclusion of Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Recent UDISE+ data (2024–25) show SC and ST students' GER at Grades 9–10 slightly exceeding the national average, reflecting affirmative policies and welfare schemes (MoE, 2023). However, tribal girls continue to record lower completion rates, prompting bridge courses and community schooling initiatives in states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

The rural–urban digital divide further compounds inequity: while over 60% of schools report computer and internet access nationally, rural connectivity significantly lags, particularly in states such as Bihar (MoE, 2023). Bridging this gap requires infrastructure investment and innovative solutions like solar-powered labs.

Curricular reforms under NEP 2020 promote multidisciplinary learning, vocational flexibility, and environmental education aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015). UNESCO (2022) frames this as Education for Sustainable Development, fostering civic responsibility and shared national identity.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, secondary education in India demonstrates significant potential as a unifying and empowering force, yet its transformative impact remains constrained by structural and systemic



gaps. Quantitatively, national indicators such as the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), retention rates, and digital access reveal uneven progress across regions and social groups. Data from UDISE+ indicate improvements in enrollment, particularly among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but also highlight disparities in rural connectivity, gender retention, and infrastructure (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023). While access has expanded, equitable participation and completion remain inconsistent, limiting the scale at which education can foster national integration.

Qualitatively, strong policy commitments signal a transformative vision. The National Education Policy 2020 foregrounds inclusion, multidisciplinary learning, and equity, aligning closely with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). Complementary initiatives such as Digital India labs in Odisha and targeted e-learning programs for rural girls demonstrate how technology and community partnerships can bridge gaps in access and aspiration. These case-based interventions show that when infrastructure investment is paired with contextual sensitivity, secondary education can strengthen both individual agency and collective identity. However, empowering youth extends beyond enrollment expansion. Quality and relevance are central to meaningful empowerment. Inclusive pedagogy—such as multilingual instruction, culturally responsive curricula, and experiential learning—ensures that students from diverse backgrounds see themselves reflected in educational content. Gender-sensitive provisions, including scholarships, transportation, and sanitary facilities, reduce dropout risks among adolescent girls. Furthermore, digital literacy has become indispensable in a knowledge-driven economy; without it, educational inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Thus, secondary education's unifying potential lies not merely in numbers enrolled but in its ability to deliver equitable learning experiences that cultivate critical thinking, civic responsibility, and shared national purpose.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest several key policy implications for using secondary education as a unifying force:

Invest in Infrastructure and Digital Access.



Bridging the digital divide is central to educational equity. While National Education Policy 2020 envisions smart classrooms, implementation requires sustained funding for rural broadband through initiatives such as BharatNet and effective maintenance systems (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Public–private partnerships can accelerate device distribution and connectivity support. Strengthening digital infrastructure will transform schools into community learning hubs and reduce rural–urban disparities highlighted in UDISE+ data (MoE, 2023).

Scale up Teacher Training and Pedagogy Reform.

Technology integration must be complemented by teacher capacity-building. Expanding platforms such as DIKSHA and NISHTHA can enhance digital pedagogy, inclusive practices, and environmental literacy. Incentives for qualified teachers in remote areas and training for multilingual, mixed-ability classrooms are essential to realizing NEP’s equity goals (MoE, 2020).

Support Girls and Marginalized Students.

Targeted schemes—scholarships, transport assistance, and sanitation facilities—remain critical for retention. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and the proposed Gender-Inclusion Fund address structural barriers (MoE, 2020). Bridge courses, extended mid-day meals, and inclusive schooling with assistive technologies can further support SC/ST, minority, and disabled learners, with improved monitoring through UDISE+.

Curriculum and Assessment Reform.

Curriculum must reflect NEP’s multidisciplinary and experiential vision. Project-based learning linked to constitutional values and Sustainable Development Goals fosters civic identity (United Nations, 2015). Reducing high-stakes rote examinations and integrating vocational subjects through local industry partnerships—such as Kerala’s district skill centers—can enhance relevance and confidence among learners.

Community and Civic Engagement.

Social cohesion extends beyond classrooms. Youth exchanges, cultural programs, and units of the National Cadet Corps cultivate unity and democratic values. Strengthening School Management Committees and community outreach initiatives enhances accountability and inclusive participation.



Alignment with Global Goals and Monitoring.

India's alignment with SDG 4 through NEP 2020 should be reinforced by state-wise benchmarks and transparent reporting (United Nations, 2015). Multi-sectoral coordination—across education, technology, health, and labor—will ensure that secondary education fulfills its unifying and nation-building potential.

Conclusion

Secondary education in India occupies a pivotal position in advancing inclusive and sustainable nation-building. The analysis demonstrates that although measurable gains have been achieved in enrollment expansion, gender parity, and social inclusion, significant disparities persist in access, digital infrastructure, retention, and quality of learning. Evidence from UDISE+ indicates encouraging progress among historically marginalized communities, yet regional and socioeconomic inequalities continue to constrain the system's transformative capacity.

The reform agenda articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 offers a coherent and forward-looking framework grounded in equity, flexibility, digital integration, and alignment with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4. However, the realization of this vision depends on sustained policy implementation, adequate financing, institutional accountability, and multi-sectoral coordination. Investments in infrastructure and digital connectivity must be complemented by robust teacher preparation, inclusive pedagogical practices, gender-responsive interventions, curriculum modernization, and strengthened community engagement.

Importantly, empowerment extends beyond mere enrollment statistics. It requires ensuring that secondary education fosters critical thinking, civic responsibility, environmental consciousness, and employable skills. When educational spaces are inclusive, participatory, and contextually relevant, they cultivate social cohesion and reinforce a shared national identity across diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In conclusion, secondary education in India possesses substantial potential to function as a unifying and empowering force. Its effectiveness, however, rests on the depth and consistency of reform efforts aimed at equity, quality, and sustainability. A strategically implemented, data-informed, and socially responsive secondary education system can transform India's demographic advantage into a generation of informed, skilled, and ethically grounded citizens capable of shaping an inclusive national future.

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