Inspiration from Birsa Munda: A Framework for Inclusive and Culturally Sustaining Educational Reforms in India

Dr. Jaya Shukla

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Balram Krishan Academy, Lucknow

Radha Rani

Senior Research Fellow, Department of Education, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Dr. Lalima

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Abstract

This research paper explores the enduring relevance of Birsa Munda's philosophy of social justice, cultural renewal, and community empowerment in shaping inclusive education reforms in contemporary India. As a tribal leader and reformer, Birsa Munda (1875–1900) championed dignity, self-determination, and ecological balance principles that deeply resonate with the goals of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and global frameworks for inclusive education. Through a critical analysis of policy documents, secondary literature, and conceptual frameworks, this paper situates Munda's ethos within the discourse on educational inclusion, decolonization, and social transformation. It proposes a Munda-inspired educational model rooted in cultural dignity, land–livelihood relevance, and collective agency, emphasizing multilingual pedagogy, participatory school governance, and context-sensitive assessment systems. The findings underscore that genuine inclusion transcends access. It entails curriculum indigenization, teacher sensitization, and community-led accountability that honor local epistemologies. The study concludes that reimagining education through the lens of Birsa Munda's vision can foster equity, identity affirmation, and democratic empowerment, aligning with India's constitutional and policy mandates for an equitable and pluralistic education system.

Keywords: Birsa Munda, inclusive education, NEP 2020, tribal education, cultural dignity, community participation, decolonizing curriculum, social justice.

Introduction

Birsa Munda (1875–1900) was not only a revered tribal leader and freedom fighter but also a visionary social reformer who devoted his life to combating exploitation, social injustice, and cultural alienation among the tribal communities of India. Despite his brief lifespan, Birsa's contributions left an indelible mark on India's socio-political and cultural landscape (Tirkey, 2019). He mobilized the Munda and other tribal groups

against the oppressive colonial and feudal systems, leading what came to be known as the *Ulgulan* (The Great Tumult), which sought not only political liberation but also social and spiritual emancipation (Singh, 2020).

Central to Birsa Munda's philosophy was the pursuit of equality, justice, and collective empowerment principles that align closely with the contemporary ideals of inclusive and equitable education. He emphasized community solidarity, self-determination, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems (Ekka, 2018). These values underscore the need to reimagine education not merely as an academic pursuit but as a transformative tool for social change and empowerment of marginalized groups (Kumar & Toppo, 2021). Inclusive educational reforms inspired by Birsa Munda should center dignity, cultural rootedness, land livelihood realities, and collective self-determination, translating his ethos of "justice with identity" into policy, pedagogy, and governance that explicitly prioritizes marginalized tribal learners and other socio-economically disadvantaged groups in India's education system. His leadership fused political mobilization with spiritual-cultural revival, earning the honorific "Dharti Aba," emphasizing dignity, self-reliance, and protection of Jal-Jangal-Zameen principles that align with learner identity, agency, and community ownership in schooling. Accounts of his reforms note rejection of externally imposed hierarchies and exploitative structures, pointing contemporary education toward decolonizing curricula and affirming indigenous knowledge systems. In the present context, education continues to serve as a powerful means for social empowerment and upward mobility. However, disparities in access, quality, and inclusivity persist, particularly for tribal and rural populations (Ministry of Education, 2022). Drawing inspiration from Birsa Munda's vision, contemporary educational reforms can be restructured to integrate cultural sensitivity, local relevance, and participatory learning models that reflect indigenous worldviews and promote social justice. Such an approach not only honors Birsa Munda's legacy but also contributes to building an education system that is equitable, inclusive, and transformative in nature (Sharma, 2023).

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the key principles of Birsa Munda's Philosophy to promote inclusive society.
2. To propose a conceptual framework for curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment according to Birsa Munda's philosophy.
3. To correlate key principles of Birsa Munda's philosophy with NEP 2020.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design, employing a descriptive analytical approach to interpret the relevance of Birsa Munda's philosophy in contemporary educational discourse. The study relies on secondary data from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents (particularly NEP 2020 and Ministry of Education reports), and international frameworks such as UNESCO's guidelines on inclusive education. A thematic analysis approach was applied to identify and interpret recurring themes such as cultural dignity, community agency, and ecological learning across historical, philosophical, and policy contexts. The findings culminate in a conceptual framework for Munda-inspired inclusive education, integrating cultural affirmation, participatory structures, and equity-oriented assessment practices.

Key principles of Birsa Munda's Philosophy to promote inclusive society

Birsa Munda's philosophy embodies a profound vision of social equality, cultural dignity, and collective empowerment principles that remain foundational to the

construction of an inclusive society. Emerging from the lived struggles of the Munda and other Adivasi communities under colonial rule, his ideas offered a framework for resistance and renewal grounded in indigenous values and collective solidarity. Munda's thought transcended the immediate context of political liberation to articulate a broader moral and social philosophy emphasizing human dignity, justice, and community harmony (Ekka, 2018).

1. Cultural dignity and identity: He challenged the dominant colonial and feudal narratives that sought to devalue indigenous ways of life, languages, and belief systems. By reasserting tribal culture and customs, Munda emphasized that inclusion must begin with the recognition and validation of marginalized identities. His insistence on preserving indigenous epistemologies underscores that true inclusion cannot be achieved through assimilation but through cultural coexistence and mutual respect (Kumar & Toppo, 2021). This aligns with contemporary inclusive paradigms that advocate for diversity as a source of societal strength rather than division (UNESCO, 2020).

2. Social and economic justice: The *ulgulan* (great rebellion) led by Munda in the late 19th century was a powerful assertion of the right to land, livelihood, and autonomy. He envisioned a society where resources were distributed equitably and communities could sustain themselves through self-reliant and ecologically balanced livelihoods (Tirkey, 2019). This focus on justice as a precondition for inclusion parallels modern sustainable development goals, which emphasize economic empowerment and equity for marginalized populations.

3. Collective agency and participatory governance: Birsa Munda mobilized diverse tribal groups into a united movement that prioritized shared responsibility and community-led decision-making. His approach resonates strongly with participatory models of governance in which inclusion is achieved through active community engagement and democratic processes. Translating this principle into contemporary practice implies ensuring that local voices especially those of marginalized groups shape policies, educational curricula, and developmental interventions that affect their lives (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Finally, Munda's vision was grounded in ethical and spiritual regeneration. He believed that moral reform and spiritual unity were essential for social transformation. His teachings called for a return to righteousness (dharma), truth, and collective well-being values that can guide modern inclusive societies toward empathy, cooperation, and respect for diversity (Sharma, 2023).

A Framework for Inclusion Rooted in Birsa Munda's Philosophy

Together, the aforementioned principles cultural dignity, land–livelihood relevance, and collective agency constitute the ethical and structural foundation of a transformative, Munda-inspired framework for inclusion in India. Building upon these guiding values, the framework is operationalized through four interrelated dimensions:

1. Curriculum and pedagogy

A reimagined curriculum and pedagogy inspired by Birsa Munda's philosophy must foreground linguistic diversity, ecological consciousness, and civic empowerment as foundational dimensions of inclusive education. The multilingual pathways proposed under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasize the importance of mother tongue-based education, particularly in the early grades. For Adivasi learners, bilingual tracks in Mundari and regional languages can foster cognitive development, cultural continuity, and identity affirmation (Ministry of Education, 2020). Unlike earlier models that promoted a subtractive shift toward dominant languages, an additive

multilingual approach preserves indigenous linguistic capital while progressively introducing additional languages for broader communication and academic engagement (UNESCO, 2020; Pathak, 2021). This strategy not only aligns with NEP's vision but also reflects Birsa Munda's advocacy for cultural pride and resistance against linguistic and cultural erasure (Singh, 2020). The second component, place-based learning, situates pedagogy within the ecological and socio-cultural context of tribal life. Learning projects centered on local biodiversity, watershed systems, forest management, and land rights history allow students to connect classroom knowledge with lived experiences, reinforcing their role as stewards of Jal–Jangal–Jameen (water, forest, and land) (Ekka, 2018). Such contextual pedagogy promotes experiential learning, integrates social sciences with environmental education, and cultivates environmental ethics rooted in indigenous stewardship (Sharma, 2023). By bridging traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary sustainability goals, schools can nurture learners' capacity for both scientific inquiry and cultural responsibility.

Finally, fostering critical civic literacy is essential for empowering learners to participate actively in democratic and community processes. Curriculum units on tribal social movements including Ulgulan, the great rebellion led by Birsa Munda can develop awareness of rights, legal frameworks, and participatory governance (Tirkey, 2019). Embedding these narratives in civic education cultivates analytical thinking, collective consciousness, and a sense of justice among learners (Kumar & Toppo, 2021). Such pedagogical inclusion transforms education into a liberatory space that not only transmits knowledge but also nurtures agency, resilience, and social responsibility values central to Munda's transformative legacy.

2. Teacher

The development of teachers is a cornerstone for realizing the vision of inclusive and culturally responsive education inspired by Birsa Munda's legacy. Effective teacher preparation must move beyond conventional training models toward frameworks that promote empathy, inclusion, and cultural competence. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the integration of inclusive pedagogies and multicultural understanding within teacher education programs (Ministry of Education, 2020). As part of pre-service inclusion, teacher education curricula should incorporate mandatory coursework on inclusive pedagogies, culturally sustaining teaching, and trauma-informed practices. Such preparation would enable teachers to respond sensitively to the diverse socio-cultural realities of tribal learners, many of whom face historical marginalization and psychological vulnerability (Pathak, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). These modules would not only enhance instructional skills but also foster reflective practice and social responsibility among future educators.

A second reform strategy involves the inclusion of community knowledge mentors local elders, artisans, and cultural practitioners as adjunct educators in teacher development and classroom processes. Their engagement can bridge the gap between academic pedagogy and indigenous knowledge systems, offering practical insights into language use, folklore, ecological ethics, crafts, and customary law (Ekka, 2018). Collaborative teaching with community mentors ensures that education remains contextually grounded and culturally sustaining, aligning with Birsa Munda's vision of community-led empowerment and preservation of indigenous wisdom (Kumar & Toppo, 2021). This participatory approach democratizes the teaching–learning process and validates community epistemologies that have historically been excluded from mainstream schooling (Sharma, 2023). The third dimension, in-service supports, emphasizes the importance of continuous professional learning and reflective practice for teachers already in the system. Regular coaching, mentoring, and workshops

focusing on multilingual classroom management, differentiated instruction, and implicit bias reduction are essential to sustain inclusive practices (Chakraborty, 2022). Linking these supports to performance-based **School Improvement Plans (SIPs)** can ensure accountability while encouraging innovation and collaboration at the school level. Such professional ecosystems reinforce teacher efficacy, build inclusive school cultures, and ensure that pedagogical inclusivity translates into improved learning outcomes for tribal and marginalized learners (UNESCO, 2020).

Collectively, these teacher development strategies rooted in inclusion, cultural respect, and community participation can operationalize Munda-inspired educational reforms, enabling educators to become facilitators of both academic excellence and social transformation.

3. Access, equity, and support

Ensuring access, equity, and comprehensive support for tribal learners is essential for translating inclusive education policy into lived reality. Drawing from Birsa Munda's ethos of social justice and collective upliftment, educational systems must be designed to address the structural barriers that limit participation and learning outcomes among Adivasi communities. These barriers geographical isolation, economic vulnerability, and historical marginalization necessitate a holistic framework that integrates financial, digital, and welfare measures. The first dimension, financial measures, includes targeted scholarships, transportation facilities, and residential schooling options adapted to the realities of dispersed tribal settlements and seasonal migration (Ministry of Education, 2022). Residential and hostel-based models can provide continuity of learning for children from migratory families, while scholarships and stipends reduce the economic burden on households (Kumar & Toppo, 2021). Such provisions, already emphasized in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, embody the principle of distributive justice central to Birsa Munda's vision ensuring that education serves as a vehicle for empowerment rather than exclusion (Pathak, 2021).

The second component, digital inclusion, is critical in bridging the learning divide accentuated by technological inequities. Establishing community digital hubs with offline content repositories in tribal languages can democratize access to educational resources (UNESCO, 2020). These centers, curated collaboratively by teachers and youth volunteers, can provide locally relevant learning materials, cultural documentation, and skill-based modules even in areas with limited internet connectivity (Sharma, 2023). This approach not only mitigates digital disparity but also reinforces community participation and ownership values deeply aligned with Munda's collective mobilization strategies (Ekka, 2018). Finally, holistic welfare interventions must be embedded within school routines to address the multi-dimensional aspects of well-being that affect educational engagement. Regular nutrition programs, health screenings, and psycho-social support are essential to counter the effects of intergenerational marginalization and poverty prevalent among tribal communities (Chakraborty, 2022). Integrating these supports within educational delivery aligns with the NEP 2020's call for child-centric and inclusive schooling environments (Ministry of Education, 2020). By addressing the social determinants of learning, schools can become spaces of healing, resilience, and empowerment—realizing the transformative educational vision that Birsa Munda embodied.

Collectively, these measures on access, equity, and welfare create a systemic foundation for inclusion that extends beyond enrollment to genuine participation, retention, and holistic development of every learner.

4. Assessment and accountability

A reimagined framework of assessment and accountability grounded in Birsa Munda's ethos must uphold cultural fairness, participatory evaluation, and community-driven monitoring to ensure that educational systems serve as instruments of empowerment rather than exclusion. Conventional assessment practices in India have often privileged linguistic and cultural capital associated with dominant groups, thereby marginalizing tribal learners whose knowledge expressions and linguistic repertoires differ significantly from mainstream norms (UNESCO, 2020). To counter this, a shift toward culturally fair assessment is essential. Adopting portfolio-based evaluation and performance tasks rooted in local contexts such as documentation of community projects, ecological mapping, or oral storytelling can provide a more authentic and inclusive picture of learner achievement (Kumar & Toppo, 2021). This approach reduces over-reliance on language-heavy standardized testing and acknowledges multiple intelligences and culturally mediated ways of knowing (Sharma, 2023). The establishment of equity dashboards can further enhance accountability by systematically tracking data on attendance, retention, learning progression, and achievement disaggregated by social group, gender, and disability (Ministry of Education, 2020). Such dashboards, if made publicly accessible and reviewed periodically by school management committees and local education officers, can serve as evidence-based tools for identifying disparities and initiating timely interventions (Chakraborty, 2022). This practice aligns with the NEP 2020's emphasis on data-driven governance and participatory monitoring, translating abstract policy goals of equity into actionable, measurable processes (Pathak, 2021).

Equally significant is the inclusion of community audits, wherein tribal bodies or village education committees conduct annual social audits focusing on school climate, language use, and cultural relevance. These audits ensure that schools remain accountable not only to administrative hierarchies but also to the communities they serve (Ekka, 2018). Such participatory accountability mechanisms embody Birsa Munda's vision of collective agency and self-determination, empowering local communities to shape education according to their cultural and developmental aspirations (Tirkey, 2019). By integrating community voices into assessment and oversight, the education system can become more transparent, contextually responsive, and equitable.

Together, these measures culturally fair assessment, data-driven equity monitoring, and community-led audits build a holistic accountability ecosystem that honors indigenous values, ensures justice, and fosters educational transformation in line with Munda's enduring legacy.

Correlation of Birsa Munda's philosophy with the National Education Policy

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a landmark reform in India's educational landscape, aiming to foster an inclusive, equitable, and quality-driven system that empowers all sections of society. Its emphasis on equity, multilingualism, and participatory governance resonates deeply with the philosophical underpinnings of Birsa Munda's vision of inclusion. Both frameworks advocate education as a means of liberation, cultural assertion, and community empowerment. The convergence of Munda's ideals with NEP 2020 thus offers a transformative pathway for realizing a holistic and inclusive education system in India (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Birsa Munda's philosophy is anchored in three interrelated principles cultural dignity, land livelihood relevance, and collective agency each of which finds reflection within the structural and ethical foundations of NEP 2020. The policy's inclusive focus on socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and other marginalized communities, echoes Munda's struggle for

dignity, justice, and self-determination (Kumar & Toppo, 2021).

1. Cultural Dignity and Linguistic Inclusion

Cultural dignity lies at the heart of Birsa Munda's thought, emphasizing the preservation and celebration of indigenous identity, language, and spirituality. NEP 2020 operationalizes this principle through its advocacy of multilingual education and the use of mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at the foundational stage. This policy provision not only affirms linguistic diversity but also reclaims indigenous epistemologies marginalized under colonial and postcolonial education systems (Sharma, 2023). Moreover, the policy's commitment to integrating local art forms, oral traditions, folklore, and environmental practices into school curricula reflects Munda's insistence on validating community knowledge and cultural heritage (Ekka, 2018). By blurring the distinction between "formal" and "folk" knowledge, NEP 2020 aligns with Munda's vision of an education system that reinforces identity and belonging rather than assimilation into dominant paradigms.

2. Land–Livelihood Relevance and Contextualized Learning

Birsa Munda's movement was deeply rooted in the protection of land, forest, and livelihood—symbolizing the inseparability of education from ecological and material realities. NEP 2020 similarly promotes contextualized learning that connects education to local needs, resources, and sustainable practices (Pathak, 2021). By incorporating environmental awareness, vocational education, and sustainable development into curricula, the policy echoes Munda's commitment to ecological stewardship and self-sufficiency. This approach redefines education as a process that not only imparts academic knowledge but also nurtures responsible custodianship of natural and cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2020; Singh, 2020). Furthermore, NEP's emphasis on flexible learning pathways and vocational integration at all stages resonates with Munda's call for relevance between livelihood practices and education, thereby ensuring that schooling contributes to empowerment rather than alienation of tribal learners.

3. Collective Agency and Participatory Governance

A defining feature of Birsa Munda's leadership was his belief in collective agency the capacity of communities to govern their own social, cultural, and educational institutions. NEP 2020 mirrors this ethos by institutionalizing School Management Committees (SMCs) and promoting decentralized decision-making through community participation (Ministry of Education, 2022). The active involvement of parents, local leaders, and educators in planning and monitoring educational processes reflects Munda's democratic and participatory ideals. In regions with significant tribal populations, empowering SMCs with representation and decision-making authority ensures that education remains responsive to local contexts and inclusive in practice (Chakraborty, 2022). This participatory governance model transforms schools into community-centered learning spaces, reinforcing Munda's legacy of self-rule (ulgulan) and local autonomy.

4. Bridging Policy and Philosophy: Toward Transformative Inclusion

The synergy between Birsa Munda's philosophy and NEP 2020 lies in their shared pursuit of justice, dignity, and empowerment through education. While NEP provides the structural framework, Munda's vision offers the ethical and cultural grounding necessary to make inclusion transformative rather than procedural. By integrating Munda's principles cultural dignity, land–livelihood relevance, and collective agency into NEP implementation, education can evolve into a site of cultural renewal and social justice. However, achieving this requires addressing persistent

challenges such as teacher shortages, infrastructural deficits, and digital divides in tribal and rural areas (Chakraborty, 2022). Localized teacher training, community-led monitoring, and digital inclusion strategies can ensure that policy intentions translate into meaningful outcomes for marginalized learners.

In essence, correlating Birsa Munda's philosophical principles with NEP 2020 underscores the necessity of grounding policy in indigenous values and participatory ethics. Together, they present a framework for reimagining inclusion as a multidimensional process rooted in identity, justice, and collective empowerment thereby realizing the transformative potential of education envisioned by both Munda and the framers of NEP 2020.

Conclusion

Drawing from Birsa Munda's synthesis of resistance, cultural renewal, and community autonomy, the vision for inclusive education in India must transcend the traditional paradigm of mere access. True inclusion demands a transformation of educational philosophy and practice one that not only brings marginalized learners into classrooms but also affirms their identities, histories, and epistemologies within the learning process. Birsa Munda's struggle symbolized a collective assertion of dignity, cultural self-determination, and ecological harmony; these principles remain profoundly relevant for reimagining educational reform in contemporary India. In alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, educational systems should aim to create identity-affirming curricula that integrate indigenous languages, ecological wisdom, and community knowledge as legitimate components of academic discourse. Community-governed schools with empowered local management committees and participatory decision-making can operationalize Munda's ideal of self-rule (Swaraj) within educational spaces, ensuring that learning is contextually rooted and socially accountable. Moreover, reforms must emphasize equitable outcomes rather than uniform standards, recognizing the diverse starting points and lived realities of Adivasi and other marginalized learners. This framework of localized implementation anchored in cultural dignity, land–livelihood relevance, collective agency, and multilingual pedagogy translates the spirit of Ulgulan (the Great Rebellion) into a peaceful and progressive educational revolution. It embodies the shift from imposed models of schooling to transformative, dignified learning ecosystems where every child can learn, thrive, and lead without surrendering their identity. Such an approach not only fulfills the democratic and inclusive vision of the Constitution and NEP 2020 but also honors Birsa Munda's enduring legacy as a pioneer of social justice and educational self-determination.

Author's Declaration:

I/We, the author(s)/co-author(s), declare that the entire content, views, analysis, and conclusions of this article are solely my/our own. I/We take full responsibility, individually and collectively, for any errors, omissions, ethical misconduct, copyright violations, plagiarism, defamation, misrepresentation, or any legal consequences arising now or in the future. The publisher, editors, and reviewers shall not be held responsible or liable in any way for any legal, ethical, financial, or reputational claims related to this article. All responsibility rests solely with the author(s)/co-author(s), jointly and severally. I/We further affirm that there is no conflict of interest financial, personal, academic, or professional regarding the subject, findings, or publication of this article.

References

1. Chakraborty, S. (2022). Implementation challenges of NEP 2020 in marginalized contexts: A critical review. Indian Journal of Educational Policy Studies, 9(1), 55–72.

2. Ekka, A. (2018). Tribal Movements and Cultural Identity in India: The Legacy of Birsa Munda. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

3. Kumar, R., & Toppo, P. (2021). Inclusive education and tribal empowerment: Rethinking policy through indigenous perspectives. Journal of Social Inclusion Studies, 7(2), 113–125.

4. Ministry of Education (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Government of India.

5. Ministry of Education. (2022). Educational development among scheduled tribes in India: Annual report 2021–22. Government of India.

6. Pathak, D. (2021). Reimagining inclusive education through NEP 2020: Policy intent and ground realities. Contemporary Education Dialogue, 18(3), 445–462.

7. Pati, B. (2004). Tribal and Peasant Movements in India. Oxford University Press.

8. Sharma, N. (2023). Rethinking equity in education: Lessons from India's indigenous movements. Indian Journal of Education and Social Policy, 15(1), 45–58.

9. Singh, P. (2020). Ulgulan: The revolt of Birsa Munda and the making of tribal consciousness. Kolkata: Orient Blackswan.

10. Tirkey, J. (2019). Birsa Munda: A symbol of tribal resistance and reform. Indian Historical Review, 46(3), 327–342.

11. UNESCO. (2020). Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education – All means all. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

12. Xaxa, V. (2008). State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India. Pearson Education.

Cite this Article