

Transforming India through Social Inclusion and Human Development with a Sustainable Development Goals Approach

G.M.R. Josephine

Lecturer in Psychology, Ch. S.D. St. Theresa's College for women (A) Eluru. Andhra Pradesh.

Abstract:

India's path toward inclusive and sustainable development critically depends on enhancing social inclusion and investing in human development domains such as gender equality, education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. Despite considerable progress, persistent inequalities continue to restrict the participation of marginalized groups, particularly women and disadvantaged communities, in the country's developmental trajectory (UNDP, 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, provide a comprehensive framework to address these challenges by promoting inclusive growth, quality education, good health and well-being, and gender equity (United Nations, 2015).

Keywords Sustainable Development Goals, multi-stakeholder, marginalized groups, women's empowerment, India's policy landscape.

1. Introduction

India's pursuit of an inclusive and sustainable development trajectory fundamentally depends on strengthening social inclusion and investing in key domains of human development—particularly gender equality, education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. While there have been important strides, deep-seated disparities continue to constrain the involvement of marginalized groups—especially women, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and persons with disabilities—in the nation's development journey. One of the most glaring disparities lies in labour force participation. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) in India saw a remarkable increase from 23.3 percent in 2017–18 to 41.7 percent in 2023–24. Despite this progress, significant gender gaps persist: rural women participate at approximately 47.6 percent, while urban women's participation lags at around 28 percent. Moreover, only about 15.9 percent of working women hold salaried or contracted jobs, with the vast majority engaged in low-quality self-employment or informal work [Teji mandiReutersLukmaan IASNewsClick](#). The average monthly income for women, pegged at INR 8,034, remains significantly below the INR 12,048 that men earn, reflecting a 33 percent wage gap [The PioneerLukmaan IAS](#). Another critical area is the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The NFHS-5 survey (2019–21) estimates that 4.52 percent of India's population—over 63 million people—live with disabilities [Wikipedia](#). Legislative frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme are instrumental in advancing equality, accessibility, and social justice for this population [Wikipedia+1](#). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, provide an integrated global blueprint to address these challenges holistically. Among the most relevant targets for India are SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), all of which serve to strengthen individual capabilities and foster equitable participation in growth and prosperity.

Amartya Sen's capability approach underscores that development should be about expanding freedoms and opportunities—freedoms that are nurtured through education, health,

and equitable socio-economic structures. These principles align closely with the SDG framework, reinforcing the argument that education and healthcare are not just ends in themselves but also catalysts for broader human flourishing. Yet translating this framework into inclusive policy requires multi-stakeholder collaboration—spanning central and state governments, civil society, grassroots organizations like SEWA, and local communities—to ensure interventions are context-sensitive, rights-based, and equitable. The following sections outline India’s strategic pathways for embedding SDG-aligned social inclusion and human development into policy mechanisms, addressing systemic challenges, and operationalizing the ambition that no one is left behind.

2. Review of Literature

A range of recent studies has deepened understanding of social inclusion, human development, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) implementation in India. A PLOS ONE article titled “Evolving Dimensions of Women’s Empowerment in India” analyzed large national survey datasets to operationalize empowerment across six domains, including decision-making, mobility, and financial independence. The study revealed that empowerment is multi-dimensional, with significant variation by state, educational level, and household wealth; notably, financial independence has improved less than other domains, indicating the need for targeted, domain-specific policy interventions. Similarly, the peer-reviewed paper “Women’s Empowerment in India: State-Wise Insights from the NFHS-5” used microdata from the 2019–21 National Family Health Survey to generate empowerment indices, linking them with health and education outcomes. It found stark inter-state disparities, with better scores in states where female education and health indicators are stronger, though economic participation gaps remain—suggesting state-tailored strategies are essential.

In the education sector, McManus et al. (2024) conducted “Scaling up Remedial Education in India: Evidence from Two RCTs”, which tested tutoring interventions in grades 3–5 across government schools. Both trials confirmed substantial learning gains when the program was implemented with high fidelity, though scalability was influenced by funding mechanisms such as development impact bonds. A related NBER working paper, “Evidence from Large-Scale Randomized Trials in Five Countries”, included India as a case site and evaluated alternative education delivery models during school disruptions. Findings showed that certain low-cost modalities sustained or even improved learning, but success depended heavily on contextual factors. On service delivery, a global public-policy study, “Does Information Improve Service Delivery? A Randomized Trial in India”, implemented community-level information campaigns in multiple states. While results showed improved uptake of some services and greater accountability, the effects varied by local administrative capacity, implying that information provision must be accompanied by supply-side strengthening.

Research on disability inclusion has also advanced. The JAMA Network Open study “Disability Among School Children Across Districts of India” mapped prevalence and types of disabilities using school-level data, revealing under-reporting in some areas and large district-level variations—highlighting the need for targeted resource allocation. Complementing this, a public-health study on the “Prevalence, Pattern and Determinants of Disabilities in India” found that disability prevalence varies across socio-demographic groups, and that affected households face increased economic vulnerability, reinforcing the need to mainstream disability inclusion into SDG planning.

In the sustainability domain, “Research on Sustainable Development in India: Growth, Key Themes and Future Directions” (Science Direct, 2025) reviewed Indian SDG research using bibliometric and thematic analysis. It noted significant growth in scholarly output but persistent gaps in integrating social inclusion metrics and local governance evidence. Education policy research has also addressed equity, with a Taylor & Francis article, “Inclusion and Equity in India’s National Education Policy (NEP)”, concluding that while NEP contains strong inclusion language, its operationalization and financing remain inconsistent. Finally, a global health scoping review titled “Achieving Universal Health Coverage in India” summarized progress on insurance expansion and service delivery, identifying persisting gaps in quality and financial protection, and calling for equity-aligned monitoring to ensure vulnerable groups benefit equally. Together, these studies provide a multi-sectoral evidence base for aligning India’s human development policies with the SDG agenda, demonstrating both notable achievements and enduring challenges.

3. Methodology

Aim of the Study - To explore how integrating SDGs into India’s policies can promote social inclusion, human development, and equity across key sectors

Objectives of the study

1. To analyse India’s status in social inclusion and human development within key SDG domains.
2. To examine how multi-stakeholder collaboration can integrate SDGs into policy to reduce inequalities.
3. To identify challenges and opportunities in implementing SDG-aligned strategies for equitable growth.

4. Procedure

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the link between social inclusion, human development, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India. It involves reviewing recent peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and SDG progress reports to understand how these goals are integrated into national and state-level strategies. Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns, challenges, and best practices, while comparative insights help highlight disparities and opportunities for inclusive policy action.

5. Interpretation

The analysis of social inclusion and human development within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicates that India has made commendable progress in certain areas, yet persistent disparities continue to limit equitable growth. The review of literature and policy documents reveals that while initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and health coverage schemes have incorporated inclusion as a guiding principle, operational gaps and uneven implementation hinder their full impact (Ministry of Education, 2020, WHO, 2021). Empirical evidence from recent studies suggests that women’s empowerment has improved in select domains—such as decision-making and mobility—but economic participation and wage equality lag behind (PLOS ONE, 2024, NFHS-5, 2021). This supports Amartya Sen’s capability approach, which stresses that development should expand freedoms and opportunities, not merely economic growth (Sen, 1999). In practice, this means that policy efforts must go beyond access and address quality, agency, and sustainability.

Similarly, the inclusion of persons with disabilities remains limited despite legislative safeguards, reflecting challenges in accessibility, social attitudes, and targeted resource

allocation ([JAMA Network Open, 2025](#)). The thematic analysis further highlights that multi-stakeholder collaboration—across government, civil society, and local communities—has shown promise in addressing such issues, but coordination and accountability mechanisms need strengthening ([UNDP, 2020](#)). Overall, the interpretation underscores that integrating SDG principles into India’s development model requires a rights-based, context-sensitive approach that prioritizes equity in education, health, and economic opportunities. Without targeted interventions for women, disadvantaged castes, and persons with disabilities, the “leave no one behind” commitment of the 2030 Agenda will remain aspirational. Strengthening policy coherence, ensuring adequate funding, and embedding community participation are essential steps toward achieving sustainable and inclusive development outcomes for all.

6. Summary

Study examines India’s progress in social inclusion and human development through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It highlights advancements in education, healthcare, and women’s empowerment, while noting persistent inequalities affecting marginalized groups. Findings indicate that despite strong policy frameworks like the NEP 2020, implementation gaps, regional disparities, and limited stakeholder coordination hinder outcomes. The study emphasises the need for rights-based, equity-focused, and context-sensitive approaches that integrate community participation and multi-sectoral collaboration to ensure no one is left behind.

7. Conclusion

India’s developmental trajectory shows both progress and persistent gaps in achieving inclusive, SDG-aligned growth. Education, healthcare, and women’s empowerment are foundational, yet systemic inequities—particularly for disadvantaged communities—continue to limit impact. Effective integration of SDG principles into national and state-level policies, along with enhanced multi-stakeholder collaboration, can accelerate progress toward equity and sustainability. The study relies primarily on secondary qualitative sources, which may limit real-time insights into rapidly changing ground realities. Additionally, the absence of primary field data restricts the ability to capture nuanced local-level perspectives. Future research should incorporate longitudinal field studies and participatory assessments to evaluate the lived experiences of marginalized groups. Policymakers should prioritize context-specific interventions, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and ensure adequate financing to operationalize SDG targets effectively. Multi-level governance and cross-sector partnerships will be critical in translating policy commitments into measurable, equitable outcomes.

References

1. Banerjee, A., Cole, S., Duflo, E., & Linden, L. (2004). Remediating education: Evidence from two randomized experiments in India. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122(3), 1235–1264.
2. Cureus. (2025). Women’s empowerment in India: State-wise insights from the National Family Health Survey-5.
3. JAMA Network Open. (2025). Disability among school children across districts of India.
4. Kitzmüller, L., McManus, J., Shah, N. B., & Sturla, K. (2024). Scaling up remedial education in India: Evidence from two RCTs of the same program at different scales. IDinsight. www.wwhge.org
5. Kumar, S., & Mondal, S. (2024). Empowerment of women from the experience of Indian states: A reflection of NFHS-5. *GeoJournal*, 89, Article 64.

- <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-023-10940-0>
6. McManus, J., Kitzmüller, L., Shah, N. B., & Sturla, K. (2024). Scaling up remedial education in India: Evidence from two RCTs. What Works Hub for Global Education Conference. www.wwhge.org
 7. Ministry of Education. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
 8. Mukhopadhyay, D. (2025). Empowerment of women and its determinants in India: A state-level analysis with NFHS-5 data. International Journal of Social Economics. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-01-2023-0015>
 9. NBER. (n.d.). Evidence from Large-Scale Randomized Trials in Five Countries. NBER Working Paper Series.
 10. Roy, B. (2021). Assessment and mapping of disability prevalence in India: A district-level analysis. *Demography India*, 50(1), 55–72. demographyindia.iasp.ac.in
 11. ScienceDirect. (2025). Research on sustainable development in India: Growth, key themes, and future directions.
 12. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Knopf.
 13. Sinharoy, S., et al. (2025). Evolving dimensions of women's empowerment in India (2006–2021). *PLOS ONE*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0327494>
 14. Taylor & Francis. (n.d.). Inclusion and Equity in India's National Education Policy (NEP).
 15. UNDP. (2020). UNDP in India. <https://www.in.undp.org/>
 16. United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
 17. WHO. (2021). Universal health coverage. [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-\(uhc\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-(uhc))
 18. World Bank. (2018). World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>